

Special Issue Reprint

Politics of Disruption

Youth Climate Activisms and Education

Edited by
Carrie Karsgaard, Iveta Silova and Victoria Desimoni

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Politics of Disruption: Youth Climate Activisms and Education

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About the Editors

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Carrie Karsgaard is an Assistant Professor in the Education Department at Cape Breton University and co-editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education*. A thread throughout her research and practice involves linking social, environmental, and epistemic justice, both within the settler colonial state of Canada and across borders globally. With an interest in the contributions and knowledges of those often excluded from formal education spaces, she works with communities and young people to co-create interventions on climate change education and policy. She is Principal Investigator of Learning Collective Worldmaking, a suite of research projects exploring ways to live in creative and relational ways within the planet's boundaries while simultaneously challenging and repairing harmful systems.

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Victoria Desimoni is a Ph.D. candidate in Education Policy and Evaluation at Arizona State University. Her research explores how non-formal and formal education can help undo colonial logics and imagine futures rooted in social and environmental justice. She is interested in approaches that honor diverse ways of knowing and being and sees education as a space to foster the inner and collective transformations needed in times of planetary crisis.

Preface

This Reprint of the *Youth* Special Issue “Politics of Disruption: Youth Climate Activisms and Education” was originally conceived during the early years following the 2019 School Strikes for Climate, when education scholars turned to young people, not only to critique the dominant forms of schooling that contributed to the climate crisis, but also to imagine the educational transformations necessary to support more just and sustainable futures. Our aim was to engage the forms of youth activism that lay beyond the mainstream—intersectional activisms that respond to human rights and wars, institutional activisms that advocate divestment from fossil fuels in higher education, and Global South activisms that introduce a multiplicity of creative alternatives to the privileged rallies that dominated our news feeds. Many of these contributions are present in this Reprint, and we invite educational researchers and policymakers to learn from these insights.

Since we first conceived of this Special Issue, however, the political landscape has shifted. The global community has fallen short of meeting the emissions targets set in the 2015 Paris Agreement, with the United States pulling out altogether. Many governments, including our own, are ignoring if not vilifying climate action and education, instead choosing to expand fossil fuel developments in response to fossil fuel industry lobbying, political backlash, and (most recently) the exponential expansion of energy-grubbing generative artificial intelligence. Such petrol-powered decisions have caused marginalized young people to face necropolitical climate impacts and displacement. In this period, the school strikes that swept the planet in 2019 have quietened down, and youth climate activism altogether has declined in public dialog.

In the context of such shifts, youth contributions still matter for education. As restrictive forces—from authoritarianism to neoliberalism—have intensified, youth activisms have responded by becoming solidaristic, subversive, and at times quotidian and relational. Young people continue to find ways to hack, bypass, revamp, and expand spaces available for agency, justice, and political possibility. By learning from the creative agency of youth across diverse contexts globally, this Reprint interrogates the ongoing complicity of mainstream forms of education in climate injustice and offers alternative ways of learning, organizing, and imagining more just planetary futures.

Carrie Karsgaard, Iveta Silova, and Victoria Desimoni

Guest Editors

Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue “Politics of Disruption: Youth Climate Activisms and Education”

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1. Introduction

Why write about youth climate activism in 2026? Years have passed since Fridays for Future saw millions of young people in cities all over the planet, especially in Europe and North America, strike for the climate. In 2019, young people walked out of schools in droves to hold their political leaders to account for inaction on emissions reductions. They spurred conversations on climate justice at national and international levels, with ripple effects on climate education policy, curriculum, and pedagogy. School strikers opened up questions about hegemonic, Western modes of schooling (Biswas, 2023; Kvamme, 2019), questioning educational “hierarchies of knowledge, of what is considered worthy of knowing and learning” (Saeed, 2020, p. 5) and revealing the ways “formal schooling is a central part of the colonial-capitalist system that strikers are demanding be changed” (Verlie & Flynn, 2022, p. 6; see also Rappleye et al., 2024). At the same time, tensions within these movements, such as the disproportionate attention to white youth activists, along with the challenges in creating intersectional climate responses, deepened discussions about climate justice and the need for climate movements to address colonialism and other power imbalances related to race, ability, and gender. These strikes were a force.

Now, however, the streets feel relatively empty of youth climate activists. Disinformation and political polarization are reducing climate concern in some countries and making climate action and education increasingly difficult or even dangerous. The growth of eco-fascist and climate denialist activism (Campion, 2023; Szenes, 2021) reveals how white supremacy, misogyny, and nationalism find expression in counter-movements that resist climate policies and energy transition, and that work toward bordering practices that refuse care to climate migrants. Big oil has infused climate talks such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP) meetings, leaving youth disillusioned with decision-makers. Petro-power remains influential in education, where oil and gas interests infuse state decision-making and industry has a hand in educational governance, curricula, and pedagogy (Adkin, 2024; Eaton & Day, 2020; Hodgkins, 2010; Karsgaard & Shultz, 2025; Tannock, 2020). Global action on emissions reductions has been poor, and wealthy states persistently resist climate reparations (loss and damage) paid to those most affected by climate change, abandoning many young people to devastating effects. Wildfires and extreme weather events lead to evacuations and school closures, shifts in agricultural zones affect subsistence livelihoods and the cost of living, and all climate impacts continue to disproportionately impact working class, racialized, Indigenous, and other marginalized youth. Many young people’s lived realities remain profoundly shaped by climate change.

In this period of relative public silence on climate change, this Special Issue of *Youth* titled “Politics of Disruption: Youth Climate Activisms and Education” looks to alternative spaces where youth are taking action, shifting relations, and making their voices heard. While streets in the Global North remain quiet in comparison with 2019, types of activism from a multiplicity of Global South contexts take up alternative knowledges in alternative ways, demonstrating the agency of young people to respond contextually to their own lived realities. At times, young people take on everyday, relational, and cultural forms of resistance, including where structural injustices persist; youth climate activism continues to shapeshift in response to political constraints. Variation in structural conditions and support networks leads to uneven possibilities for youth to enact social change. Together, youth experiences interrogate dominant ideologies in education, as well as the ways education systems are implicated in broader colonial–capitalist, industrial, and neoliberal systems. Within restrictive systems, youth activism expands space within formal education as participants hack, bypass, revamp, and creatively open up spaces for youth agency, justice, and political possibility. Altogether, climate activism offers both direct and indirect provocations to education systems (Karsgaard et al., n.d.), to which the authors collectively and carefully attend.

2. Challenging Colonialism Through Global South Activism

While educational research has embraced the global youth climate strikes, particularly in the Global North, articles in this Special Issue explore activism in other contexts, revealing diversity among *activisms* informed by place and context and reflecting epistemic plurality. The activism of marginalized youth and young people in the Global South, including the “South of the North” (Andreotti et al., 2018), is often invisible and less attended to, particularly where activism is culturally unacceptable (Chang, 2022), criminalized (Ceric, 2020), underground, or perhaps unrecognized as activism, reflecting hermeneutical epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). Countering the coloniality of knowledge production (Mignolo, 2013) in relation to youth climate activism, authors in this Special Issue attend to marginalized activisms, particularly as these resist and subvert colonial knowledge systems and mobilize alternative knowledge in alternative ways.

In “Promoting Food Security and Biodiversity Restoration: Insights from Kenyan Youth Climate Change Activists,” Emmanuel Simiyu Wanjala counters the coloniality of knowledge production by utilizing a Youth Participatory Action Research approach to center the lived expertise, environmental practices, and context-specific solutions of Kenyan youth. Through two initiatives, the Ondiri Wetland Botanical Garden and the One Million Trees for Kilifi project, Wanjala traces how eight youth activists address food insecurity, malnutrition, and biodiversity loss in nonviolent ways by cultivating vegetables and fruit orchards in partnership with schools and local communities. Collaboratively enacted, such activities prioritize interspecies relationality and foster health among both human and more-than-human beings, toward the thriving of future generations. By centering the lived expertise of Kenyan youth, and putting forward concrete methods for co-research with youth, Wanjala disrupts extractive knowledge hierarchies and illustrates how community-rooted activism generates locally meaningful climate responses.

Centering youth co-creators from South Africa and Guadeloupe—communities disproportionately affected by climate change—Dena Arya, Lydia Ayame Hiraide, Alude Mahali, and Kristina Johnstone challenge the coloniality of knowledge that structures dominant climate justice discourses in “Amplifying Global Majority Youth Voices Through Creating Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces: The Theatre of Climate Action (ToCA) Project.” Foregrounding artistic research as a decolonial methodology, the article examines how collaborative theater-making within the Theatre of Climate Action (ToCA) project can disrupt

hegemonic, text-based ways of knowing. By mobilizing Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks, the project cultivates modes of knowledge production that privilege embodied understandings and collective meaning-making. These approaches contest universalizing abstractions and epistemic hierarchies that have historically marginalized global majority perspectives, instead enabling youth to articulate alternative narratives of climate injustice grounded in their sociomaterial realities. The article argues that such co-created artistic processes offer vital interventions into the epistemic inequities underpinning the climate crisis, advancing cognitive justice as foundational to climate justice.

Centering Pacific youth perspectives on climate change in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Ali Glasgow's "Pacific Youth Activists Encountering Climate Change: Implications for Education" reveals how Western-centric educational systems marginalize Indigenous knowledges and climate realities. Drawing on Talanoa methodology and a Pacific Values framework, the study demonstrates that Pacific young people experience climate change not as an abstract scientific concept but as an existential threat. Young people's testimonies highlight systemic racism, teacher unpreparedness, and curricular erasure, all of which reproduce colonial knowledge hierarchies. By foregrounding Pacific understandings of environment, the article argues for a decolonial shift that delinks from dominant Western pedagogies and recenters Pacific epistemologies as legitimate and necessary. The findings call for transformative changes to education policy, teacher education, and pedagogy that position Pacific young people not as passive recipients of Western climate narratives but as knowledge holders whose experiences, values, and activism contribute to more just, culturally sustaining climate education.

3. Everyday, Relational, and Cultural Activisms

Another theme in this Special Issue involves a rethinking of youth climate activism beyond the familiar register of mass mobilization, public protest, and direct confrontation. Rather than centering activism solely in streets, strikes, or institutional arenas, these articles draw attention to the ways youth are relocating climate action into more intimate, everyday spaces through art, education, research, care, and community practice. In these accounts, activism is not a singular political event but a transformative approach to life, shaped by context, political constraint, and the ongoing work of sustaining oneself, one's community, and the more-than-human world.

In "‘Do Not Go Through the System Passively’: Integrating Environmental Studies and Ethnic Studies Through a Social Justice Outdoor Education Program for High School Learners," Laura Moorhead and Jeremy Jiménez foreground the quiet, slow, and deeply relational forms of climate activism that unfold in the everyday life of a school. Focusing on the Wilderness and Arts Literacy Collaborative (WALC) in San Francisco, they show how young people—many navigating poverty, racialized exclusion, or educational precarity—become climate actors not through protest but through processes of healing, reconnection, and identity work. In a braided curriculum that integrates environmental studies, ethnic studies, and outdoor education, students learn to see land, community, and self as inseparable, relocating climate action into intimate, everyday spaces of learning and relation. Advocacy emerges not as a distant political demand but as a felt responsibility toward place and people. Importantly, the teachers themselves enact activism through pedagogy, modeling what it means to refuse passivity within systems never designed for their students' flourishing. In this way, activism takes shape less as a singular political event than as an orientation to life grounded in care and responsibility, expanding dominant understandings of how climate justice work is lived and sustained.

Similarly attentive to the politics of the everyday, Turkan Firinci Orman's study "Everyday Activism Performances and Liminal Political Positionings of Early Youth in

Bulgaria” conceptualizes everyday activism as a set of liminal, often understated practices that unfold through identity formation, school life, and interpersonal relations. Rather than overt confrontation, youth activism appears here as subtle negotiation, ethical positioning, and incremental change—forms of action that may remain unrecognized as “activism” precisely because they do not align with dominant, Global North imaginaries of political action. Orman’s analysis challenges the assumption that non-confrontational activism is apolitical, instead revealing how such practices can be deeply political responses to cultural norms, institutional expectations, and constrained civic space.

Jensine Raihan and colleagues extend this reframing further by positioning research itself as a site of everyday activism. In “Research-as-Solidarity, with Youth Leading the Way,” activism takes shape through relational, care-based research practices that prioritize accountability to communities over academic extraction or visibility. By working alongside youth and communities rather than on them, the authors articulate an approach to climate action grounded in solidarity. Here, activism unfolds through listening, co-learning, and sustained presence—practices that resist both the spectacle of protest and the hierarchies of conventional knowledge production.

Taken together, these contributions unsettle narrow definitions of youth climate activism that privilege visibility, confrontation, or institutional recognition. They suggest instead that, under conditions of inequality, surveillance, fatigue, or exclusion, youth often enact climate politics through forms of action that are quieter, relational, and culturally embedded, resonating with emerging work on non-confrontational activism that understands political engagement as strategic, situated, and oriented toward sustaining life rather than staging opposition (see You & Auld, 2025). These modes of activism may be less legible within dominant political frameworks, yet they are no less transformative.

4. Activism Amid Political Constraints

While the previous section highlights how youth relocate climate action into everyday and relational domains, the contributions that follow foreground contexts in which such relocations are not only strategic but necessary—where visibility itself is dangerous and political action must be carefully negotiated. In these settings, climate activism cannot take the form of protest at all. Political repression, surveillance, structural inequality, and material precarity fundamentally reshape whether and how young people can act. Rather than interpreting these conditions as the absence of activism, the articles in this section examine how youth climate politics are reworked under constraint, emerging through lived experience, strategic restraint, and forms of engagement that exceed conventional movement-based imaginaries. Here, survival itself becomes political, and activism takes shape in ways attuned to risk, context, and unequal power.

In “Experiencing Climate Change and Living Through It—South African Youth Perspectives on Activism, Action and Justice,” Tyler Booth and Harriet Thew examine youth climate action in a context shaped by deep historical inequality and ongoing socio-economic precarity. For the young people in their study, climate activism does not begin with abstract environmental knowledge or future-oriented risk but with the embodied realities of drought, unreliable water and energy systems, polluted air, food insecurity, and unemployment. Climate politics emerge from living through a crisis rather than learning about it from a distance. Activism is framed as survival and responsibility—an insistence that climate governance and education confront the entangled legacies of apartheid, extractivism, and energy injustice. In foregrounding lived experience as a catalyst for political engagement, Booth and Thew challenge protest-centric, Global North assumptions and show how climate action in South Africa is inseparable from broader struggles for dignity and systemic transformation.

Rezvan Erfani's "Climate Activism in Our Part of the World and Methodological Insights on How to Study It" turns to youth environmental engagement under authoritarian governance in Egypt, where visibility itself is politically risky. Drawing on ethnographic research in Cairo and Sharm El-Sheikh, Erfani introduces the concept of "environmental non-activism" to describe the strategic, low-profile forms of engagement adopted by youth and environmental organizations. Here, overt confrontation is avoided in favor of practices that emphasize environmental awareness and lifestyle changes—forms of action that may be tolerated by the state while remaining politically ambivalent. Erfani shows how repression reshapes not only activism but also the conditions of research itself, detailing methodological strategies such as counter-interviews, careful relationship-building, and institutional protection. Many participants reject the label "activist" altogether, underscoring how political context governs what can be named, enacted, and studied as climate action.

Taken together, these contributions unsettle assumptions that equate activism with visibility, confrontation, or formal participation. They demonstrate how youth climate politics are reworked under constraint through survival, strategic restraint, and situated engagement. In doing so, this section calls for climate education and research frameworks that take geopolitics seriously, recognizing that what counts as activism, who can act, and how action can be studied are always shaped by unequal and often hostile political conditions.

5. Youth–Adult Relations and Institutional Encounters

Another theme across this Special Issue concerns youth–adult relations and the institutional terrains within which youth climate activisms are enabled, constrained, or redirected. While youth activism is often seen as oppositional or autonomous, these contributions foreground how young people's opportunities to enact social change are deeply shaped by adult partners, organizational structures, and institutional logics.

In "Applying the 7P Framework to Youth-Adult Partnerships in Climate Organizing Spaces: 'If We Are Going to Be the Ones Living with Climate Change, We Should Have a Say,'" Ellen Field and Lilian Barraclough focus on the conditions under which youth–adult collaborations can meaningfully support youth leadership rather than reproduce hierarchical control. Drawing on focus groups with high school students involved in an Environmental Youth Council in Canada, the authors revisit and expand Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) 7P framework to articulate key dimensions of ethical and effective youth–adult partnerships. Purpose, positioning, perspectives, power relations, protection, place, and process are identified as foundational elements, with the authors further proposing the inclusion of psychological support and positive impact. Together, these dimensions foreground the relational and affective labor required to sustain youth engagement, while emphasizing the importance of shared ownership, transparent power-sharing, and institutional accountability to youth-defined goals. Rather than assuming participation is inherently empowering, the framework surfaces how adults and adult-led organizations must actively reconfigure their practices to create conditions in which youth agency can flourish.

Meanwhile, in "Empowering the Collective: Redefining Youth Activism and Political Dynamics within Nonprofit Organizations," Aurora Nicolas and colleagues critically examine the ways institutional contexts can delimit youth activism, even when organizations publicly state commitments to sustainability, equity, and youth empowerment. Written collaboratively by youth activists involved in the afterschool program at a science museum in Northern California, Climate Activists Regenerating Earth (CARE), the article exposes the structural contradictions of youth participation within a neoliberal nonprofit sector. The authors trace three ways youth engagement is curtailed in this context: misalignments between professed values and institutional practices, including partnerships with corporate polluters; tokenization and adult control that reward passive participation while constrain-

ing youth autonomy; and policy and funding structures that restrict more radical forms of youth activism. These three dynamics, the authors argue, illustrate how adultism operates in this context by reducing youth activism to symbolic participation while prioritizing organizational reputation and donor interests. Youth activism is permitted only as long as it remains non-disruptive and aligned with institutional interests. In response to these dynamics, the study calls for reimagining youth–adult relations through shared governance, co-created policies, and direct youth access to resources, emphasizing that authentic intergenerational collaboration requires dismantling hierarchical power structures and centering youth autonomy in decision-making.

Both contributions underscore that youth climate activism often unfold through uneven encounters with institutions—encounters that can either expand or constrain the imaginaries, capacities, and futures available to young people. Addressing these encounters is essential for understanding not only how youth activism is shaped but also how institutions themselves might be transformed to enable meaningful youth engagement in climate justice.

6. Education Systems as Sites of Both Harm and Possibility

Across the suite of articles in this Special Issue, we see the ways education is complicit in generating the climate crisis and perpetuating climate injustice. Embedded within broader neoliberal socio-economic systems or authoritarian political contexts, many education sites embody prevailing worldviews and are shaped in relation to dominant structures, thereby contributing to climate injustice, restricting youth climate learning and action, and imposing a multiplicity of violences upon young people, from tokenization to outright oppression. In such contexts, youth agency is significantly curtailed. In the face of these realities, authors in this Special Issue point to the need for education research to carefully explore structural conditions within education and across its broader social, cultural, economic, and political relations. By addressing the institutionalization of worldviews from colonialism to adultism, patterns of repression and surveillance, and institutional barriers, education research can better elucidate the dynamics affecting youth agency and support the rights of young people to articulate their perspectives, respond to climate injustices, and drive change. Further, significant shifts to educational decision-making and funding structures are necessary if formal education is to adequately respond to marginalized youth. Climate education research must take power seriously, rather than assuming participation is inherently empowering or emancipatory. This requires climate education research to develop methods capable of attending to slow, affective, relational, and risky forms of political engagement that are often rendered invisible by outcome-driven or event-based frameworks.

While many articles depict educational inflexibility and injustice, authors across this Special Issue also highlight youth agency as they hack, bypass, revamp, and creatively resist, whereby they either expand space within formal education for climate action or move beyond it into alternative spaces. At times, young people appropriate educational knowledge and power in solidarity with marginalized groups through research and creative practices. In other cases, activists shift systems by disrupting disciplinarity to serve the justice and well-being of both land and oppressed communities. Where institutional timelines favor structured learning, discrete projects, and immediate, measurable outcomes, youth climate action often unfolds over long, uneven timescales, through waiting, endurance, repetition, solidarity, and care. These contributions also foreground temporal injustice, revealing how youth climate action unfolds across delayed, uneven, and often suspended timelines that clash with institutional demands for immediacy, visibility, and measurable impact. Such efforts challenge event-based models of political engagement and outcome-based

understandings of action in climate education. Collectively, these articles share how the work of transforming education can emerge from young people themselves, where their knowledge and experience offer an expertise that calls into question formal systems.

Across the articles shared here, education systems are revealed as sites of both harm and possibility. As we continue in the current period of relative youth climate activism “silence,” we recommend that research stay within the tension between education’s complicity in extractive, colonial systems and its potential to be reworked from within and beyond institutional boundaries. We also recommend deepened consideration of the entanglements of climate activism with other forms of much needed social activism, including pro-Palestine solidarity, anti-imperialist resistance, worker strikes, human rights movements, Indigenous land and water, protection, and anti-pipeline activism. Attending not only to human activism but also the agencies of elements (earth, air, fire, and water), and of all beings, may deepen activism through integrative and relational responses to injustices. By more deeply understanding climate and other social movements intersectionally, solidaristically, and across human and more-than-human relations, education may be better positioned to respond to the deep roots of injustice toward healthier and more just futures for all.

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Article

Promoting Food Security and Biodiversity Restoration: Insights from Kenyan Youth Climate Change Activists

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Abstract

This article centers the experiences and voices of eight Kenyan youth climate change activists by highlighting how they navigate local and global challenges while engaging in climate change action. Specifically, this article examines how the activists are combating food insecurity and promoting biodiversity restoration by discussing findings from two projects. The first project is the Ondiri Wetland Botanical Garden, where youth activists have planted over 10,000 indigenous trees, of which about 58 are different species of trees native to the Kenyan highland community of Kikuyu, to counter biodiversity loss and alleviate the impact of climate change on flora and fauna. The second project is the One Million Trees for Kilifi project, where activists are planting orchards in various schools in Kilifi County in Kenya to mitigate the impact of climate change and end malnutrition among K-12 learners. Guided by the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodology, this study counters the deficit and exclusionary narrative that has often left out young people from climate change education and governance policy decision-making and advocates a more equitable and inclusive approach that centers their voices and perspectives in solving existential problems like climate change.

Keywords: youth; YPAR; climate change activism; food security; biodiversity restoration

1. Introduction

Research on climate change action has received considerable attention recently since most scholars have agreed that “climate change is a real, human-caused, dangerous but solvable” crisis (Roser-Renouf et al., 2014, p. 173). While the impacts of the climate change crisis have affected all and sundry, Global South countries continue to bear the disproportionate impact of the climate change crisis despite their marginal contribution to the global greenhouse gas emission menace, a major cause of climate change (Islam & Winkel, 2017). Scientists have observed that the disproportionate impact, especially on African countries, is due to high vulnerability indexes. Climate change has led to “ecosystem disruption, loss of food production, reduced economic output, increased poverty, increased water and energy insecurity, increased diseases and loss of human life, loss of natural and cultural heritage”, inter alia (IPCC, 2021, p. 1299). Climate change has also led to “climate-induced migrations”. These impacts have exacerbated inequalities and worsened poverty in the Global South’s rural, arid, and semi-arid areas (Islam & Winkel, 2017; IPCC, 2021; Von Storch et al., 2021; Slevin et al., 2020). Therefore, it is vital to understand how local communities in Global South countries respond to these grand challenges.

In Kenya, climate change has led to the destruction of schools and the scaling down of schooling hours due to flooding and high heat levels in arid and semi-arid areas in the

northern part of the country. It has also led to school dropouts due to hunger, destruction of homes due to flooding, and a rise in sea levels leading to displacement and climate migrations, water shortages, reductions in the education budget, and, in some cases, devoting less attention to the education sector, among others (Omambia et al., 2009). Despite the aforementioned impacts of the climate change crisis, political leaders and those in decision-making positions have continued to adopt a business-as-usual approach toward this crisis. Therefore, calls for urgent, confrontational, and radical actions have dominated the global climate change crisis discourse, especially in the Global North (Berglund & Schmidt, 2020; Capstick et al., 2022). Inadequate funding for research has also contributed to the underrepresentation of Global South climate change activism. Funding for climate change-related research and projects has been predominantly awarded to institutions and researchers in the Global North. Analysis of more than 4 million research grants between 1990 and 2020 indicates that 78% of the USD 1.26 billion climate change-related research funds went to institutions and scholars in the Global North, with only 14.5% being channeled to researchers and institutions in Africa (Islam & Winkel, 2017).

The number of people participating in climate activism, especially young people, to influence socio-political, economic, and overall systemic change has also increased. Vu et al. (2021) document that over 7.9 million activists participated in the 2019 Global Climate Strike. In Global North countries like the United States, over half a million people in the US and 7.6 million worldwide participated in the Spring 2019 global climate change strikes that Greta Thunberg and other youth climate activists spearheaded (S. R. Fisher, 2016; D. R. Fisher & Nasrin, 2021a, 2021b). Despite the high number of young people mobilizing and participating in climate change activism, there is limited literature on how youth climate movements and activists in the Global South emerge and evolve. Global North scholars dominate the current literature on youth climate change activism and focus on activists in Europe and North America, even though millions of youths in other parts of the world are involved in climate change activism. For instance, Lee et al. (2020) conducted a narrative synthesis to establish how children and adolescents aged between 8 and 19 perceive climate change's causes, impacts, and solutions by analyzing 51 peer-reviewed articles. Of the 51 peer-reviewed articles the authors analyzed, 39 were from high-income countries in the Global North, and 12 were from upper-middle and lower-middle-income countries, with no articles originating or focusing on youth climate activists from African countries. While Lee et al. (2020) determined that perceptions about climate change among youth differed across individual participants and countries, perceptions of youth activists from Global South countries like Kenya were not captured.

Youth climate change activists utilize various forms of activism/activism tactics. Depending on the political structures in certain countries, some tactics are more effective in influencing policy and attracting the attention of the media and other interested parties than others (McAdam, 1983). Forms of climate change activism like picketing, movements for boycotting schools like Fridays for Future, marching, filing lawsuits against corporations and governments, signing petitions, and civil disobedience have proved successful in the Global North because of mainstream media coverage, extensive research, and conducive political opportunity structures (McAdam, 1983; Morris, 1999). With increased media attention in the Global North, activists, especially youths, have been at the forefront of adopting violent activism. However, there is limited literature about youth climate change activism in the Global South since the forms of activism they adopt often attract mainstream media or less coverage. This makes it hard to understand the impact of Global South youth climate change activism. While disruptive forms of activism are instrumental in attaining meaningful policy outcomes and creating global awareness compared to non-violent and indirect tactics, it is important to note that some violent and direct tactics

attract counteractions from authorities, like arrests and use of force on protesters, especially in countries with unfavorable political opportunity structures (D. J. Wang & Soule, 2016; Anfinson, 2023; O'Brien et al., 2018). Counteractions from the government often instill fear and intimidation among activists and, to some extent, attract punishment, especially regarding missing school.

Other researchers like Uldam and Askanius (2013) established that some community members failed to join the aggressive actions in Copenhagen due to a lack of clarity about the message conveyed by the *War on Capitalism* video shared on various social media. Some thought protesters were to engage in vandalism, which would likely attract counter-movements and police arrests in Copenhagen. Global mainstream media have also been selective in covering the work of youth climate change activists, with youths from the Global North benefiting from widespread media coverage compared to their counterparts in the Global South.

This article looks at how youth climate change activists in Kenya use non-violent means to fight food insecurity and promote biodiversity restoration. The article bridges the blatant underrepresentation of Global South youth climate change activists in the extant literature by centering the experiences and voices of Kenyan youth activists and how they use non-violent means to create meaningful social transformation. For this study, the term youth refer to people in the age bracket of 18–35 years (Kenya, 2013). This definition was derived from Article 260 of the Kenya Constitution, 2010. The section below briefly describes the two projects that youth climate change activists worked on before, during, and after this study.

2. Context

I collaborated with eight Kenyan youth climate change activists from two organizations to conduct this study. The activists were proactively involved in climate change activism in their communities in Kenya while I was based in the United States. I followed up on each of the projects digitally through WhatsApp and Zoom. Before the start of the study, we created a WhatsApp group to allow daily check-ins and follow-ups on projects with each participant. The study took place between January 2024 and August 2024. Below is a brief description of the two projects I will discuss in this study.

2.1. The Ondiri Wetland Botanic Garden

In the Kenyan context, wetlands refer to land surfaces permanently or temporarily soaked with fresh, saline, salty, or brisky stagnant or moving water (Omambia et al., 2009). Wetlands are vital in storing about 15 percent of terrestrial carbon globally (Kabubo-Mariara & Kabara, 2018; Zhou et al., 2007). Wetlands face extinction due to anthropogenic activities like pollution, poor drainage, encroachment, misuse, and overexploitation (Zhou et al., 2007).

Ondiri Wetland is located in Central Kenya, Kiambu County, about 20 miles from Kenya's capital city, Nairobi. Youth activists focus on restoring the Ondiri Wetland by planting a botanical garden. Their main goal of planting and sustaining the garden is to alleviate climate change and counter biodiversity loss of flora and fauna by planting indigenous tree species and vegetables. This will increase vegetation cover, which aligns with the Kenyan government's goal of achieving 15 billion trees by 2032. The Botanic Garden has collections of different species of shrubs, vegetables, and trees planted for educational purposes. The botanical garden has become a learning center for students and members of the public.

2.2. *The One Million Fruit Trees for Kilifi*

The One Million Trees for Kilifi is a youth-led community-based organization in Kilifi County, Kenya. Kilifi County is located along the coastal region of Kenya. The organization is focused on ending food insecurity and climate change by planting one million fruit trees in 400 hundred K-12 schools in Kilifi County, Kenya, by 2032. The organization has about 150 youth climate change activists and is guided by the following objectives:

- Establishing fruit orchards within the school compound to improve learners' access to nutritious fruits.
- Training learners on the importance of taking care of the environment.
- Promoting environmental sustainability by enhancing local tree cover is essential for improving rainfall patterns.
- Creating awareness about the importance of fruit trees in improving nutrition and climate resilience.

3. Methodology and Methods

The study utilizes Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), qualitative research where adult researchers and youths explore and address societal issues by engaging in collaborative socio-political actions within school, community, or global settings (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Rubin & Jones, 2007; Cammarota & Fine, 2008, 2010). Apart from contributing to a research process in collaboration with adult researchers, YPAR was ideal for this study since it allowed youth participants to gain vital civic, academic, and social skills that positioned them strategically as agents of change in their communities (Rubin & Jones, 2007; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Smith et al., 2010). YPAR involves working with youths in designing and conducting all or some stages of research that affect them, their immediate family members, their community, and other systemic and existential issues (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Brydon-Miller, 1997; Chandler & Torbert, 2003). Youth participants can be involved in “forming research questions, collecting and analyzing data, reporting results, as well as helping to shape possible interventions aimed at improving the conditions studied” (Herr & Anderson, 2014, p. 29). Through reflection and action, youth participants can question and challenge the mainstream positivist paradigm, often reinforced by Global North researchers, which scientists have termed as the only legitimate and valid way of knowing and learning (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, 2010). Youth can collaborate with principal investigators to design research, propose methods, and facilitate research activities, including presenting results and stimulating discussions (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Maguire, 1987; Baum et al., 2006). This interactive and iterative process must consider a “reflection of historical, political, economic, and geographic contexts to make sense of issues and experiences requiring action for changing or improving a situation” (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017, p. 38). While there are growing debates regarding when youths can join the research process and the extent to which they are involved in the research process, Herr and Anderson (2014) and Smith et al. (2010) observe that participants can enter research that has been initiated by an adult researcher with developed research questions, or on rare occasions, youths may initiate a research process and invite outside researchers to join.

Regarding involvement and leadership, researchers like Maguire (1987), Cammarota and Fine (2008), and Checkoway (2012) have affirmed that the focus should be more on youths' impact in the process rather than the person leading the research process and the way data are analyzed. Like other forms of action research, YPAR allows researchers to honor, center, and reflect on the experiences, expertise, knowledge, and skills of people most directly affected by issues under research to bring about transformational change socially, economically, culturally, and politically (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Brydon-Miller, 1997;

Mertens, 2023). Through inquiry, YPAR participants should gain a robust understanding of societal inequities and work collaboratively to devise solutions (Smith et al., 2010; Checkoway, 2012). Therefore, researchers utilizing YPAR must commit to amplifying the roles and values of youths often excluded and underrepresented in mainstream knowledge creation.

3.1. Participant Recruitment

To follow through with the planning, acting, observing, and reflecting process, I used purposeful, criterion, theoretical, and snowballing sampling to recruit participants for this study (Mertens, 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jones et al., 2021). The sampling criteria, which will be as an initial eligibility survey, included being a Kenyan citizen or permanent resident, currently residing in Kenya, actively involved in climate change activism either individually or in partnership with non-governmental organizations, at least 18 years old but not older than 35 years of age, and having a high school diploma or enrolled in a post-secondary institution. This sampling criteria had several justifications. First, it allowed me to recruit participants who are involved in climate change activism in Kenya, are not minors, and have a better understanding of the impacts of the climate change crisis in Kenya and globally. It also helped me recruit activists with a good knowledge of the K-12 Kenyan education system. The contact person, a renowned youth climate change activist in Kenya, was instrumental in sharing the eligibility survey with his circle of influence using various social media platforms. I created a good rapport and credibility with the participants during a pilot study I conducted in Fall 2022. I recruited ten participants who worked on different climate change projects. The rationale behind such numbers stems from my purpose of building meaningful connections with participants to gather authentic data, ease of building consensus with a more minor team, flexibility in setting up meeting schedules for focus groups, and ease of addressing power dynamics (Maguire, 1987). The numbers enabled me to generalize the research to other settings and provide a thick/detailed description of climate change as a global systemic problem (Mertens, 2023).

3.2. Data Collection

Upon receiving the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I embarked on the data collection process by collecting each participant's demographic information via an eligibility survey. To enhance anonymity and confidentiality, participants were required to develop a pseudonym while completing the eligibility survey (Jones et al., 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). I assigned a random one to participants who indicated NA under the pseudonym question. Following the eligibility survey, the eight eligible participants, aged 18–35, signed an informed consent form detailing the purpose of the study, the suggested data collection process, potential risks, benefits, confidentiality protocol, right to withdraw, and participant questions. During the first focus group, I reiterated to participants their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time and the need to address each other with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

The data collection process involved four focus groups conducted between February 2024 and May 2024, each lasting an hour. Participants filled out an eligibility survey and a climate change activism survey, which focused on actions that they were taking in their communities. In July 2024, I conducted eight 30 to 40 min interviews with all participants to establish how they made sense of the data collected during the four focus groups. To improve their knowledge of how their colleagues were progressing with activism projects and practice skills they had learned from the research activities, participants were engaged in 30 to 45 min peer/paired interviews in August 2024. Participants took a leading role in developing the interview protocol used during the semi-structured and peer or paired in-

interviews, and I moderated the questions and interview sessions. Throughout the study, we were engaged in daily empowering journaling and networking activities using the WhatsApp social platform. The focus groups and individual interviews were audio-recorded using the Zoom platform, transcribed using otter.ai, and analyzed manually and using Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative data analysis software (Version 9.0, Dedoose, 2024).

To better understand the impact of climate change in Kenya and the actions being taken by the eight youths, photovoice or documented photography, a methodology specific to PAR where participants tell stories about the effects of certain societal phenomena in their communities through photographs was used (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Cahill, 2007; C. Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants took photos of the climate change problem and the actions that they were taking, described the context of the photos, shared their views or experiences about the climate change crisis, and brainstormed solutions. Photographs were shared during focus groups and one-on-one interviews using the Zoom share screen option. I stored the collected photos in a secured Google folder that was accessible only to me. Participants consented to the shared photos being used in the research. Photovoice discussions were instrumental in developing quotes and themes. I took notes and kept a journal throughout the data collection process, often seeking participant clarification.

3.3. Data Analysis

Since data analysis in YPAR does not begin after data collection, the climate change youth activists and I followed an iterative process of observation, feedback, note-taking, inquiry, reflection, and action throughout the research process to make sense of the data we collected (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Considering the duration of the study, data analysis was an ongoing process rather than a single or few-session activity. Before ending every Zoom session, participants always pointed out key issues or quotes they found powerful or worth noting. To ensure that collected data were transcribed accurately and timely, I utilized the Otter.ai software to transcribe Zoom recordings (Otter.ai, 2024). Given the cost of the Otter.ai software, participants were not involved in transcribing. However, they verified transcripts, including redacting self-identifying information, highlighting significant quotes, and removing irrelevant information during member checking (Camarota & Fine, 2008). To minimize burnout among participants, I carried out additional line-by-line coding, followed by inductive and deductive coding, before returning transcripts to participants for verification and review (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Deterding & Waters, 2018). Therefore, the quotes identified during Zoom sessions by participants, as well as personal notes and member check feedback, were collapsed into various themes. This article focuses on two salient themes that we found to be relevant to all projects that were being undertaken by all eight youths: food insecurity/malnutrition prevention and biodiversity restoration. Before diving deeper into these themes, the section below highlights my positionality and how it relates to this study.

3.4. Positionality

How data are collected, analyzed, and interpreted and how participants are represented highly depends on a researcher's social identities—class, status, hierarchy, gender, race, education level, value systems, experiences, et cetera (Herr & Anderson, 2014; Jones et al., 2021). The understanding of a researcher's social identities concerning participants helps to avoid what Jones et al. (2021) termed “hearing, seeing, reading and presenting results that conform to the researcher's experiences and assumptions about self and others, rather than honoring the participants' voices in the study” (p. 41). I consider myself a millennial insider conducting research with and by other insiders—youth climate change activists. I was born in western Kenya, where my family and other community members

rely on farming as a source of livelihood. As a young boy, I enjoyed supporting my family on the farm by weeding, tending, and watering our animals and crops. This was because the climate was favorable, and rainfall was reliable. I attended a local primary and high school before attending the University of Nairobi for my undergraduate studies. I worked as a high school teacher before immigrating to the US as an F-1 student. I also embody the social identities of a cis-gendered, able-bodied, and heterosexual male pursuing a doctoral degree. These identities come with privilege and power and may impact how I conduct my research and represent my participants. However, I focused on working with participants, often giving guidance and remaining objective by journaling my feelings, decisions, actions, roles, and reflections about myself, participants, and data as it evolves. This insider privilege and my previous experiences, understanding, and knowledge of the Kenyan context may have influenced my assumptions and approach toward the topic, my interaction with participants, and how I collected and interpreted data.

I am also an outsider to the topic and the Kenyan context. I have lived away for nearly half a decade and gained my graduate education at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the United States (US) and in a highly individualistic society where environmental racism and racial capitalism are deeply embedded within the socio-economic and political culture. This outsider educational and life experience might be reflected in how I frame, understand, and approach my participants, the methodology I adopt, and my epistemological standpoint toward climate change activism. I also recognize my privilege as an able, cis-gendered Black man with native-like proficiency/professional skills in English and Swahili. Inevitably, my insider–outsider identity and privileges may shape my assumptions about the topic and how the participants perceive me. However, while discussing my findings, I strove to focus on what I agreed upon with participants and in line with the philosophical underpinnings of YPAR.

Epistemologically, I identify as a constructivist. Constructivists assume that all knowledge is socially constructed, and researchers should understand the dynamic world of experiences from the point of view of their participants (Schwandt, 2000). Knowledge development occurs “within a preexisting social milieu, ever interpreting and reinterpreting itself” (Schwandt, 2000, p. 16). The constructivist lens also underscores research as an interactive and iterative process in which the researcher and co-researchers are mutual knowledge co-creators. This is in line with the assumptions underlying all forms of action research which view “knowledge creation as an active process, knowledge being uncertain and the object of the inquiry is the “I”” (Shamrova & Cummings, 2017, p.36).

Therefore, my agency and experiences in Kenya and the US motivated me to research climate change activism, a topic I deeply care about. While I agree that youth activism is not the one-fix-it-all solution to climate change, I am confident that it shows that as a young person, I care about my generation, generations to come, and generations of other non-human species that are adversely affected by anthropogenic activities that exacerbate the climate crisis. Thus, I want to be part of the solution by raising awareness and influencing policy change through collective action.

4. Findings

This article examined how Kenyan youth climate change activists are engaged in climate change activism. After engaging in iterative and collaborative data analysis from two youth-led climate change community-based organizations, two themes were identified from the two activism projects: food insecurity/malnutrition prevention and biodiversity restoration.

4.1. Food Insecurity/Malnutrition

Many Kenyan communities are experiencing food insecurity because of climate change, which has led to low agricultural output (Omambia et al., 2009; Ochieng et al., 2016; Kabubo-Mariara & Kabara, 2018). Anthropogenic activities like cutting down trees to make room for human settlement, domestic use, exportation, and urbanization have exacerbated the climate change crisis. While the climate change crisis is a global issue, interventions in local communities are still needed (see Figure 1).

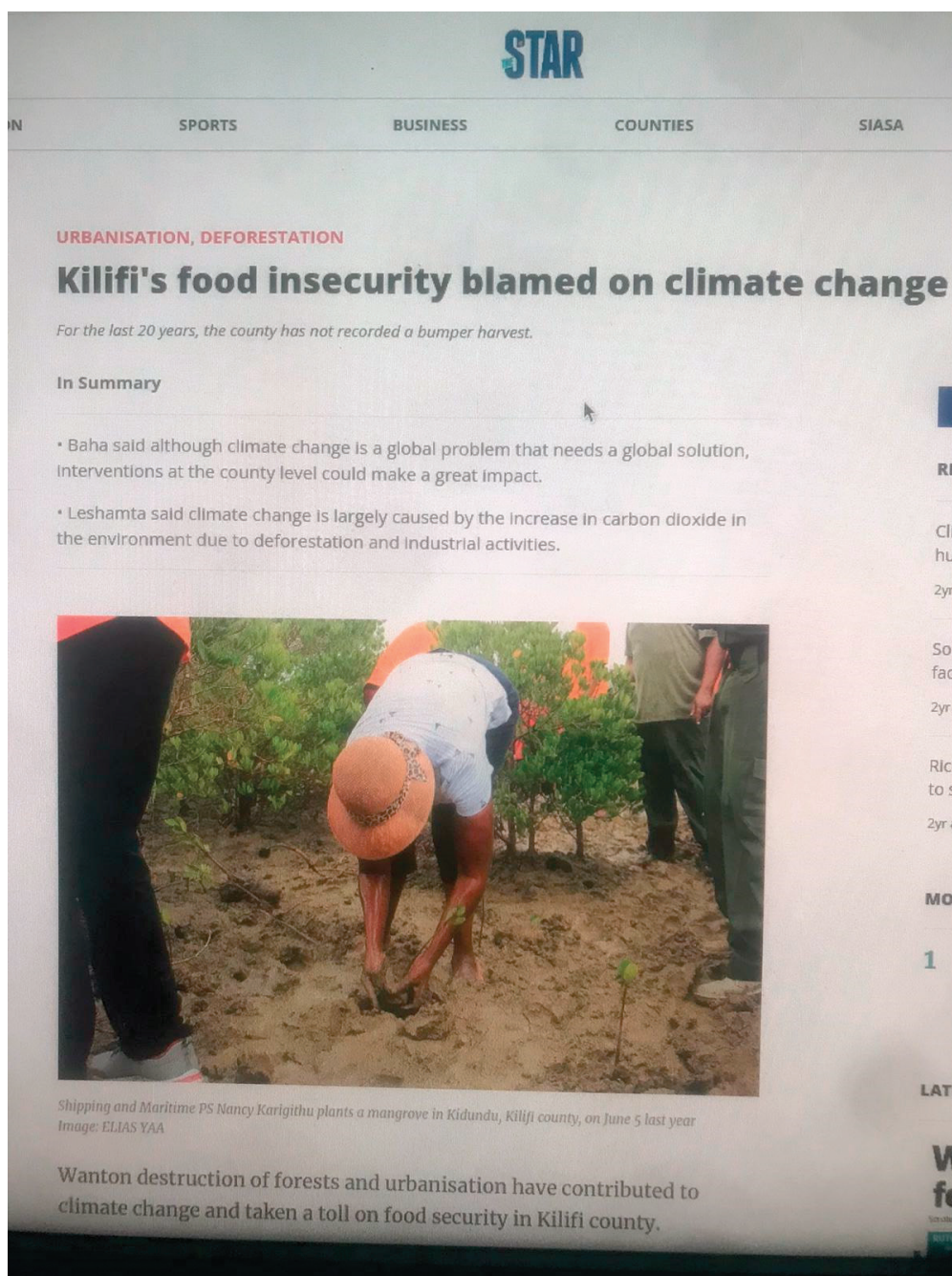


Figure 1. Newspaper article about food insecurity in Kilifi, Kenya.

However, Kenyan youth climate activists are collaborating with community members to address the food security and malnutrition crises by planting fruit trees in schools and developing botanical gardens where indigenous trees and vegetables are grown. Youth climate change activists are prioritizing tree species that can withstand more extended

periods of drought. In Kilifi, youth-led community-based organizations like the One Million Trees for Kilifi are leading projects prioritizing planting mango trees in schools. Mtu wa Miti, the founder of the community-based organization, shared the following:

I shared the image about food insecurity in Kilifi County, and the reason for that is because the food security is caused by climate change. In recent years, Kilifi used to be a food basket for a lot of other places, but due to human-based activities like cutting down trees for charcoal and uncontrolled mining they caused the climate pattern to shift that farmers were unable to do farming and Have good produce. We are solving the problem of malnutrition. Because when you check on the first photo that we sent, it was food security. Food security goes hand in hand with the health of the people of Kilifi. Why am I saying so? These people are unable to have different varieties of crops, specifically, when you talk about vegetables, which are the best, the best type of food that gives vitamin A, because of the drought and climate change, they are unable to plant and harvest vegetables. And now we can plant vegetables in a region that has minimal rainfall, we must have a substitute, and the substitute is something like a mango tree that you're going to plant, and if it matures, it is going to be resilient even to more month of not receiving rainfall. From statistics which come from the health department of the county. It's just that out of five children who are born, three of them suffer from malnutrition, and out of those three who are taken to the hospital to get supplements of vitamins and other things two have what you're calling recurrent cases, which means they can go back home, but they come back to the hospital because they don't have the food that is required to sustain them.
Mtu wa Miti

Another activist working with the Ondiri Wetland Botanical Garden project also shared how they are championing nature-based solutions to combat food insecurity by growing organic vegetables native to the Kikuyu community of Kenya. The activists also plan to establish botanical gardens that grow indigenous vegetables in schools adjacent to Ondiri Wetland. Bob noted the following:

We introduced vegetables in the botanic garden as one of the sources of livelihood for the people in the locality. We're growing purely indigenous organic vegetables for human consumption. We're also not using chemical fertilizers and pesticides or such. The team involved in this project is purely youth. Since our model Botanic Garden is up and running, according to the IUCN Standard that we're using, scalability is critical. We have mapped out about 44 schools within the 3 km buffer zone of Ondiri Wetland and are planning our scale-up projects there. Currently, we have started a second Botanic Garden at Kamangu High School. We desire to have planted at least 20 Botanic Gardens by December 2026. Bob

In Figure 2, Bob shared a photograph of the Ondiri Wetland Botanical Garden. He chose this picture because it speaks directly to their work in the fight against food insecurity. The botanical garden has more than 270 indigenous trees, a total of about 58 different species of trees native to the Kenyan Highlands of Kikuyu. Some of the species are rare, some endangered, and some missing.



Figure 2. A photo of Bob and his friend at the Ondiri Botanical Garden.

The youth climate change activists have also stressed the importance of having context-specific approaches to climate change. This will ensure that solutions specific to certain areas will be adopted. *Mtu wa Miti* shared the following:

So we are doing the forest to call back the rain so that we can be able to address the issue of food security in Kilifi County. But the short-term thing that you are doing to address that food security is to plant the 1 million fruit trees in schools, if you count so that in three

years, those trees can produce fruits to the kids. So fruits is a form of food which is going to help the students be able to get something to eat. When you come to society and the policymakers recently, we have to have a lot of tree planting going on worldwide, and at the same time, they are trying to solve the problem of climate action. Still, now it should ring in their mind that climate action affects different regions differently because we'll talk about global warming in some spaces that are affected by floods. Still, Now in our region, the effect that climate change is bringing it is food insecurity and malnutrition. So as we share the photos that we have with students, society and activists like me planting fruit trees in schools, the policymakers should come up with policies that hold the people or institutions, those who have funds and are doing these climate action projects to be able to have specific solutions to specific regions, for example, in our region, instead of them just planting any type of tree, they must be held as possible. Mtu wa Miti

As Bob and Mtu wa Miti shared, youth activists-led organizations are engaged in impactful projects to promote food security in their respective communities. In the next section, I will examine the theme of biodiversity restoration.

4.2. Biodiversity Restoration

Climate change-related effects like floods, droughts, unbearable heat, and cold seasons have disrupted and imbalanced the lives of various species on Earth. Many species have lost their habitats, leading to either extinction or climate-induced migrations. The record-high extinction of indigenous species will worsen if the current anthropocentrism continues. To reverse the negative anthropogenic impacts on diversity, youth climate activists in Kenya are prioritizing approaches that can reverse and restore biodiversity. For example, Mtu wa Miti shared the following:

We have three activities. One, we are calling it biodiversity restoration, whereby we are doing a pilot project in a place that is called Magarini in Kilifi County. Magarini used to support 75% of forest cover in the entire Kilifi, but now, that forest cover is nearly 15% due to the burning of charcoal and other human interactions and destruction. So we'll have a pilot project of 100 acres where we are doing a fruit forest. A fruit forest means different types of trees. We are doing fruit trees and mangos. We are doing indigenous trees, the likes of neem tree. We are doing fruit trees the likes of museums and many more trees so that the insects that used to exist, the small animals, the rodents, all the animals that used to exist in that region can be increased in number, because when pollination stops, then we don't have more new seedlings being formed. So we have to create a forest where we have these insects that can help to pollinate other forms of plants around and enable a new ecosystem to be built on, so if we do this, we can restore the forest cover in Kilifi County. And if you restore forest cover in Kilifi County, you are saying we are calling back the rains. Our group's tagline is calling back the rain. So, if you call back the rains, it will not take one year or two, but it is a project that takes more than ten years to see the long-term effects.

While Mtu wa Miti acknowledges that restoring biodiversity will not happen overnight, his CBO's hope, resilience, and optimism is a step in the right direction. His sentiments point to a generation working for today's generation and generations to come. In Figure 3 below, Mtu wa Miti and other activists from One Million Trees for Kilifi are collaborating with students from Masho Girls' High School in Kilifi to plant mango trees on the school farm. This aligns with the organization's mission of advocating for biodiversity restoration.



Figure 3. Students at Masho Girls High School in Kilifi County planting mango trees in the school orchard.

Collaborating with students and schools will enable learners to love and care for the environment and prepare them to become agents of change in their communities. The mango trees will eventually provide fruits to school communities, habitats for birds and insects, and much-needed beautiful surroundings. Another youth activist, *Bob*, shared how they collaborated with community members to restore the Ondiri Wetland. While the Ondiri Wetland is a source of the Nyongare River, which feeds into the Nairobi River and then the Athi River and ends up in the Indian Ocean, it has started drying up. The activists have planted *Osiris Lanceolate* and other indigenous trees in the wetland to provide a thriving ecosystem for all species. Through advocacy and education of the community members, the youth activists have prevented human encroachment on the wetland. For example, *Bob* observes the following:

The project I'm working on with my community is doing wetland restoration because we have realized that wetlands are as crucial as forests. So, as many people have put a lot of effort into tree planting, we have noted that wetlands can do precisely that. However, they have been diminishing at a higher rate. They have been diminishing twice as much as forest cover has been happening. So, we are working on the restoration of wetlands. Those are freshwater wetlands; by doing that, we have also been planting trees around, not just trees. As someone highlighted, some tree species are dangerous to wetlands, hazardous to riverine ecosystems, and even some terrestrial landscapes. So, we are working with indigenous tree forests. I mean the tree species that initially inhabited the area, but they have become extinct out of encroachment, climate change, and the challenges we face today. We have a botanic garden for education, so the community is empowered to learn how to work with nature.

Bob's sharing demonstrates the importance of wetlands. He also agrees with other participants that tree species planted around water sources should be monitored, as some are dangerous to marine livelihoods and threaten wetlands.

Educating communities around the Ondiri Wetland has enabled the activists to gain enormous support from community members and enhanced collaboration (see Figure 4). Partnering with the community and creating awareness has enabled the youth activist group to scale up and conserve the land that is around the wetland. There is, however, a lot of intentionality and financial resources that go into these efforts. Bob shared the following:

In the past two weeks, we have intensified our conservation efforts to restore biodiversity in our Wetlands while combating climate change. Today, we hosted one of our partner organizations, which planted trees on the site they adopted. Adopting a site is a strategy to bring the community together to help us conserve the entire 33-acre wetland, with the community taking the lead. Understanding that we may not readily have financial support, we're working with partners who can support us in kind, and it's working. The botanic garden we have established near the swamp is for educational purposes, and we're contacting institutions to conduct their ecological, biological, and geographical studies there. We are intensifying our education programs as we're in talks with primary and secondary schools, not excluding tertiary institutions. We're working on a program to revamp environmental clubs and establish similar botanic gardens in the schools. Our challenges are the financial implications our efforts exert on us when we need more funding. Bob

To further restore biodiversity, the One Million for Kilifi organization runs an initiative that focuses on planting trees on the streets of Kilifi town. This will not only improve the air quality in the town but also improve the city's esthetics and restore the habitat of birds and insects destroyed while building skyscrapers for human settlement. As one of the CEOs of One Million Trees for Kilifi described, this will shift locals' mindset and perception about deforestation. Kilifi has lost a lot of forest cover due to deforestation. *Mtu wa Miti* pointed out the following:

Today, we launched another activity called the Green City Initiative, which now focuses on changing people's perceptions from having a city full of skyscrapers, buildings, and malls to a city with green spaces, butterflies, and bees. So, most cities are the most populated areas. So if someone can walk in a town or a city in a green corridor, seeing plants, trees, and flowers, then the next time, the next thing he's going to do when he reaches his home place is replicate the same where he's staying. So, the Green City initiative is focused on changing the mindset of people to see that for a developed nation or a developed community, we have to have enormous malls. If they have that perception, they will continue cutting down trees. But if we change the perception that green spaces are the best places for human beings to stay, then they will reduce the deforestation that is taking place. Mtu wa Miti

Findings from both the Ondiri Wetland Botanical Garden and the One Million Trees for Kilifi showcase the impactful work that Kenyan youth activists are engaged in, especially concerning fighting food insecurity and restoring biodiversity. The youths have forged meaningful collaboration with community members and even expanded their work to K-12 schools within their area of operation. Financial constraints remain to be a challenge that youths have to contend with. Most of the support comes from community members and activists who donate trees and volunteer labor, sometimes using their own money to offset the cost of their activism. To empower the activists with finding alternative ways of securing funds for their impactful work, we held a successful workshop on grant/proposal writing during one of the focus groups featuring an expert focusing on education in conflict

and emergencies. The youth found this session to be extremely empowering. During the study, we also collaborated with the One Million Trees for Kilifi activists to create a GoFundMe to raise funds needed to purchase fruit tree seedlings and cover logistical costs. Our goal was to raise at least 500 USD, but we only managed to raise 100 US dollars, an equivalent of about 12,600 Kenyan Shillings. These funds were used to purchase over 250 seedlings.



Figure 4. A picture of Bob educating community members about ways of restoring the Ondiri Wetland.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined how Kenyan youth climate change activists engage in climate change activism. The main participants were working with the Ondiri Wetland Botanical Garden and the One Million Trees for Kilifi, youth-led community organizations focusing on tackling the climate change crisis in multiple but related ways. Using YPAR methods like focus groups, photovoice, semi-structured interviews, surveys, and workshops, participants identified two salient themes from the study: food insecurity/malnutrition and biodiversity restoration. Through collaboration with community members and K-12 educational institutions, the activists are planting fruit trees, indigenous vegetables, drought-resistant trees like the Mangrove, and other native trees in schools and botanical gardens. Collaborating with K-12 and community members is critical in creating ecologically just generations that prioritize looking after the environment and all species in ways that care for their bodies and those of their loved ones (White et al., 2024). The youths have also created awareness among community members about the need to forge meaningful relationships and coexistence between humans and nature. These findings suggest that while the climate change crisis has affected both human and non-human species, youth activists are not being left out but are taking a more proactive approach to

safeguarding the environment (Cahill, 2007; Deterding & Waters, 2018). They are tackling the crisis head-on by advancing nature-based solutions to fight climate change, financial constraints notwithstanding. Ultimately, these efforts yield fruit, as demonstrated by this study's findings. This study's findings reinforce other studies by Han and Ahn (2020) and Costanza-Chock (2012) who argue that youth activists are robust, innovative, and collaborative social transformative agents that should be the center of research. This is especially important for a country like Kenya, where 35% of the total population is aged between 18 and 35, and youth make up about 55% of the labor force.

This study further points to the pressing need for more research on youth climate change activism in Kenya and the Global South utilizing methodologies of ethnographical participatory research. Global North scholars involving Global North youths have conducted most of the research. Given the contextual differences, especially the political structure, societal expectations, and finances, activism and tactics employed during activism in the Global North may be different from those used by Global South youths. The conceptualization of climate change activism may also vary depending on geographical location. Therefore, future research on youth climate change activism should continue illuminating the impactful work carried out by youth activists in the Global South. Research should always endeavor to center youth's voices, actions, and experiences. While this study focused on youth climate change activism in Kenya, future comparative case studies should examine how youths in other Global South countries, especially those with different political structures, engage in climate change activism. Such longitudinal studies will create a more nuanced understanding of why and how youth in other geopolitical regions are involved in climate change activism.

This study demonstrates that more resources should be channeled into youth-led organizations and institutions that nurture them. Financial power will enable them to go above and beyond to attain meaningful change. Even though this study focused on how youth climate change activists in Kenya use project-based and nonviolent forms of activism, more longitudinal studies are needed to provide greater insights into the use of violent tactics, if any, and their resulting social change. While violent tactics of activism have yielded a meaningful social change in the Global North (D. J. Wang & Soule, 2016; Anfinson, 2023), it will be insightful to establish if some youths in Kenya are using violent/confrontational activism tactics and the impact other than police brutality, arrests, punishment, and abduction of activists. This was beyond the scope of this study; therefore, future studies can focus on it.

While YPAR has been hailed as a methodology that empowers participants to be agents of change in their community and equips them with data collection analysis and presentation skills, it has some underlying setbacks for researchers and co-researchers. Specific to this study was the inclusion of participants throughout all the phases of a research project and the democratic aspect of methodology (Smith et al., 2010; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Checkoway, 2012). This requires a lot of time commitment and robust knowledge about the community issues under investigation and can present a lot of burnout and logistical challenges to both participants and researchers. Depending on the number of participants and the power imbalance between the researcher and co-researchers, it can be challenging to build consensus about timelines, the social actions to be undertaken, and how data are analyzed, interpreted, and presented (Maguire, 1987). Notwithstanding these challenges, my goal was to negotiate, empower, raise consciousness, and collaborate with participants while centering the voices and experiences of the participants.

Secondly, while most phases of YPAR are usually conducted in person, with virtual platforms reserved for collecting data and sharing materials or ideas among researchers, this study was conducted in a virtual setting through Zoom and WhatsApp. Like other

virtual YPAR studies (Rivera et al., 2022), this study faced methodological issues, including interaction with participants to build meaningful connections, technological inclusivity, cost, and internet reliability, among other topics. To address these challenges, I formed a WhatsApp group, with participants' permission, to provide an informal but safe space where we could check in with each other, share our actions, and evaluate the progress of the research process daily. The group was complementary to the scheduled video Zoom meetings. Creating the WhatsApp group, a widespread social media platform among youth and activists in Kenya, enhanced our camaraderie and acted as a forum where we shared emerging issues on climate change activism and a networking tool. Through this informal interaction, the youths' actions with minimal resources challenged my biases and privileges resulting from my outsider and insider lenses. To offset the cost of the internet, I compensated participants based on an amount we agreed upon during the first focus group. All eight participants attended all scheduled focus groups, semi-structured interviews, peer/paired interviews, interacted with others in the WhatsApp group, and completed all agreed-upon tasks virtually. This speaks to the practicality of conducting virtual YPAR, especially with proper planning, access to the internet, and mutual understanding among co-researchers. Therefore, this study adds to the extant YPAR conducted remotely.

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Article

Amplifying Global Majority Youth Voices Through Creating Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces: The Theatre of Climate Action (ToCA) Project

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Abstract

Youth make up a fifth of the world's population and will suffer the consequences of the climate catastrophe to differing extents depending on their social and geographical locations. The climate crisis is thus a matter of both intergenerational and racial/imperial injustice. Intersectional and interdisciplinary climate justice approaches are growing in the field of youth climate activism and, more often, these are necessarily engaging with collaborative methods to platform the voices of marginalised youth and those who live the colonial difference. Our paper provides early reflections from a youth climate activism artistic research project titled 'Theatre of Climate Action: Amplifying Youth Voices for Climate Justice in Guadeloupe and South Africa' (ToCA). In this project, sixteen young people aged 18-30 from South Africa and Guadeloupe collaborate to design, produce, and create theatre performances that reflect their exploration of climate justice through their lived experiences using artistic research methods. Specifically, we examine the opportunities and challenges in using the framework of Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces to support collaborative and emancipatory art-making practices that allow youth to become co-creators in this project. Insights revealed that an intentional embrace of safety, bravery, and risk as an ethico-political basis for art making was critical to cultivate a sense of community, trust, and belonging for youth co-creators.

Keywords: artistic research; climate activism; climate justice; global south(s); collaborative research; interdisciplinary; safer spaces; theatre; youth; decoloniality

1. Introduction

The world is home to approximately 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24 years old—and this number is only projected to grow in the future (United Nations, 2024). Young people are—now and in the future—carrying the heaviest climate burdens (Skillington, 2019), especially those in countries which have contributed the least historical carbon emissions across Africa and the Caribbean (UNCTAD, 2021). Decolonial thought draws attention to the long history of extractivism, possession, and dispossession that mark these geographic spaces and that continue to feed racialised inequalities within and between countries today (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 159). The urgency of climate change is thus a matter of intersectional, intergenerational, and racial/imperial injustice.

In 2024, we came together as a group of five artists and academics living and working across Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean to respond to these complex issues of intersectional, intergenerational, and racial/imperial climate injustice. Our focus was ‘Global South(s)’ as spaces from which to think and act against dominant narratives, colonial legacies, and practices which re/produce inequities. This led to our interdisciplinary project ‘Theatre of Climate Action: Amplifying Youth Voices for Climate Justice in Guadeloupe and South Africa’ (ToCA). Acknowledging that artistic practices constitute ways of knowing, the project aligns with the propositions of decolonial, Indigenous, Black, and feminist scholarship—all of which offer ethical and political grounds from which to challenge hegemonic relations. Part of this work demands a deeper listening to and platforming of the marginalised voices, histories, and experiences of those who live the colonial difference.

We invited sixteen young people aged 18–30 from South Africa and Guadeloupe into an artistic research process to explore their lived experiences of and generate knowledge around climate (in)justice through collaborative theatre-making. While each group (in South Africa and Guadeloupe) works independently, the project invites both formal and informal dialogue among participants, fostering transnational knowledge exchange, creating a community of practice, and enabling them to learn from each other’s experiences of climate injustice and platform their own narratives. In turn, as researchers and creative practitioners, we are learning from the collaborations, with the goal of developing meaningful practices of knowledge creation and transformative dialogue with and for Global Majority¹ youth.

The purpose of this article is to provide key methodological reflections emerging from the early stages of our collaborative project. This project follows an artistic research methodology and uses collaborative theatre-making as a democratic, agentic, and relational process to source and create performance material. In this paper, we turn specifically to our use of ‘Safe(r)’, ‘Brave(r)’, and ‘Riskier’ Spaces as a grounding ethos and politics for the project. We examine the opportunities and challenges of entering a collaborative artistic process that seeks to speak directly to the experiences of young people at the frontlines of climate change and environmental degradation.

Our use of the ‘Safe(r)’, ‘Brave(r)’, and ‘Riskier’ Spaces framework is informed by the work of Bustamante Duarte et al. (2019) on Safe(r) Spaces and Rikard and Villarreal (2023) on Brave(r) and Riskier (acceptable risk) Spaces. We frame our use of ‘Safe(r)’, ‘Brave(r)’, and ‘Riskier’ Spaces as important, complementary tools, which can animate and facilitate collaborative arts research that responds to issues of climate in/justice. Using these frameworks, we have been exploring how aspiring to such spaces supports youth co-creators to develop a sense of belonging, ownership, and agency within a collaborative climate justice project. We draw on these frameworks to support youth agency as a key driver of the necessary (inevitable, even) futures of climate justice that cultivate creativity, care, compassion, and collaboration across differences. We further offer that this frame draws on the interdisciplinary concerns of decolonial, Black, Indigenous, and feminist studies by emphasising relationality. In the context of decolonial discourse specifically, relationality means attending to local histories, embodied conceptions and practices, contesting universalising and totalising claims, and acknowledging the interdependence of all living beings (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 1). This is underscored in the African philosophical concept of *ubuntu*, which emphasises not only the relatedness between humans but also between human beings and the more/other-than-human world. Subjectivity, in the philosophy of *ubuntu*, is understood not as individual but as ecological (Le Grange, 2021, p. 17). *Ubuntu* has been similarly articulated in Guadeloupe, especially in relation to Caribbean perspectives on climate justice (Ferdinand, 2019).

ToCA hinges on collaborative theatre-making as an artistic research process, which supports young people to become researchers and knowledge creators in their communities to create social change and enable activism/social and political transformation (Wright, 2020). In this sense, ToCA's methodology shares aspects of Participatory Action Research and Youth Participatory Action Research. It enhances youth agency and supports young people to be on an equal footing in research that is often *about them* rather than developed *with* or *by* them (Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2018). In this collaborative creative process, the youth participants are not the objects of the research. Rather, they are contributors to an unscripted artistic process. The data in this project is shaped through the conversations and reflections that are shared in workshops and rehearsals, but equally through movement, song, and play.

Our overarching research questions might be framed as follows: How do young people interpret what it means to build Brave(r)/Safe(r)/Riskier spaces together in a collaborative theatre-making process? How can Brave(r)/Safe(r)/Riskier spaces inform an ethos and politics for a shared artistic process? To what extent does the articulation of their/our collaborative work support these projects to unfold in more equitable and generative ways? How can Brave(r)/Safe(r)/Riskier spaces contribute to co-constructing 'other' (as opposed to dominant or hegemonic) ways of knowing in climate justice activism? Existing research currently focuses disproportionately on high-profile, White, and higher socio-economic-status youth climate activists. This has resulted in the under-representation of those who experience the intersecting inequalities of climate change, especially those from racially minoritised and Global Majority communities. The ToCA project seeks to counter hegemonic narratives around climate action by platforming youth voices in South Africa and Guadeloupe on these issues. This discussion focuses on our use of Safe(r)/Brave(r)/Riskier Spaces frameworks as an ethico-political basis from which to support this work. Insights shared with us by our youth co-creators offer some initial reflections on how these frameworks have shaped the process and outputs of our own activities. Specifically, we reflect on and analyse recorded oral, written, and illustrated reflections produced by our young co-creators during activities co-facilitated by the ToCA university/artist teams in early workshops with them. These insights from the young people form the basis for our analysis and insights presented below. Using this data, the contribution of this article is to offer insights to enrich scholarly understandings of the Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Space frameworks that we used to achieve our project's aims.

This article is organised as follows: In the first part, we provide a brief background on the context of the project. Next, we provide a brief review of the literature on artistic research methodologies and collaborative theatre-making approaches for addressing climate justice, with a focus on the role of safety, acceptable risk, and bravery as an ethos for such research. Then, we give a brief outline of the methods supporting this research project. The section that follows draws on findings from the ToCA project to discuss and reflect on the youth perspectives of feeling safe and brave in our collaborative theatre-making spaces for climate justice. Finally, the concluding section will pull together the various strands explored throughout the discussion to open up some further questions for future, much-needed collaborative research projects, which focus on climate justice, particularly in the context of the Global South(s).

2. Contextualising Theatre of Climate Action (ToCA): A Decolonial Youth Project

ToCA is an experimental transnational pilot project animated by interdisciplinary teams based in South Africa and Guadeloupe. The latter, a small Caribbean Island controlled by the French state, is already experiencing the harmful effects of the climate crisis.

This includes rising temperatures, changes in rainfall, and the prospect of rising sea levels and intensified hurricanes (Van Meerbeeck et al., 2021). Additionally, the island has been affected by environmental scandals at the hands of the French state and private companies—particularly around the use of toxic chemicals in banana plantations, which can be found in the bloodstreams of more than 90% of the island’s population today (Resiere et al., 2023). Civil society has responded with resistance and protest action, connecting these issues to histories of colonialism, reproductive rights, and climate justice (Ferdinand, 2019). Our youth co-creators are extremely conscious of these environmental and climate changes, which form the landscapes in which they live, work, and play. In the remainder of this section, we draw on the youth perspectives we gathered through our research as we continue to contextualise our project.

In the eyes of our youth co-creators, collaborating through theatre making proves a powerful and urgent response. The environment is deeply important to them, as it is to us. It can and should be addressed, theorised, and politicised through youth agency:

“I would like to play my part to raise consciousness in the face of climate change”
(Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

The issues of a changing climate and degraded ecologies in Guadeloupe matter to our youth co-creators in several ways. In their own perspectives, the issues of ecological and social in-/justice are so all-encompassing that they even shape features as fundamental as their heritage, culture, and even overarching history and shared narratives that reunite the island:

“...the Chlordecone scandal is part of our inheritance, and now part of the island’s story/history.” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

The young people describe a personal connection to these issues as Guadeloupean islanders whose lives are touched by these issues. Moreover, this personal connection invites a wider conversation, one which transcends national borders and reaches towards transnational dialogue and solidarity:

“I want to put my abilities to use in this project to create art which carries powerful messages and impacts the cultural heritage of my native island and even beyond its borders.” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

Still, though, they recognise the potency of their own agency in the midst of ecological and social problematics. Facing entangled crises of exploited lands and peoples, they are not immobilised. They recognise and express their own motivation, drive, and creative potential:

“Tackling the topics of social and environmental justice through a new approach is particularly interesting to me. The idea of using art to raise awareness about these issues is essential—and to do so in parallel with another country will enrichen our responses.” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

Indeed, the issues to which they respond demand no minor task. But in the arts, they see the potential to articulate the kinds of sensitivity, knowledge, and futures that such a crisis demands:

“The environment is a subject which is close to my heart. I hope to understand and learn through collaborative exchange. To express oneself is important to me, no matter the medium. It makes it possible to liberate oneself, to become more sensitive, and to bring new solutions” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

Like Guadeloupe, South Africa is experiencing significant exposure to food insecurity, energy and water crises, and climate harms as a result of climate change. Indeed, the

national average temperature has increased twice as fast as global temperatures since 1990 (Adom et al., 2022). But the country has also been a dynamic hub for climate justice organising, with the emergence of coalitions that seek to advance a vision of climate justice that brings environmental, energy, gender, racial, immigrant, climate, and economic justice together. In the words of our youth co-creators,

“If we can get the word out there, educate and raise awareness to different communities we can stop climate change and learn to take care of our land, our nature.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

Youth co-creators affirmed the relevance of climate justice conversations to their daily lives. Indeed, this is a material issue that qualitatively shapes almost every aspect of South African landscapes and communities, even if not framed as such in dominant narratives:

“Where I come from there are no conversations and activities that address climate crisis and impacts but it affects most of the people from the township daily, things like the burning of houses due to global heat, the floods that fill the houses when it’s raining and many more.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

This experiential knowledge is crucial to the perspectives and places at which we come to meet our youth co-creators. They experience climate injustice on a daily basis—but they are not the first in their families or communities to do so. Certainly, our youth co-creators draw transnational, temporal, and sectoral links which join the dots between issues of labour, extractivism, and transnational solidarities:

“I remembered a time when my father used to work in cobalt digging in the Democratic Republic of Congo, my country of birth to make ends meet. This is how [climate justice] became important to me. . . . there are workers out there, not just in Congo, but all over the world who work in harsh conditions just as my father did a long time ago.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

Acknowledging the shared colonial histories of extractivism, possession, dispossession, enslavement, and the subjugation of peoples, it is in these urgent parallel but not unconnected contexts that we devised and invited our youth co-creators into ToCA. Our project seeks to build capacity, generate, and disseminate knowledge about innovations in youth-led transformative climate justice education through the arts. As such, our project makes use of a series of knowledge exchange activities, including training programmes, workshops and seminars, the creation of practical resources (such as scripts produced by young people and illustrated zines that can be shared easily online), and wide outreach across the civil society sector, supported by an online and social media presence. The knowledge created through the artistic research process will support climate justice education actors (young people, educators, academics, and policymakers) to participate in and shape climate justice education.

ToCA seeks, too, to create cross-community dialogue both within and across Guadeloupe and South Africa in the long term; knowledge production and knowledge exchange amongst creative practitioners, researchers, and young people (recognising that these categories of people can and do overlap!); new networks with a capacity to respond to issues around climate justice in ways that speak to the local and *global* ecological politics of gender, race, coloniality, and intersectionality; and finally, significant creative output that can be used as a climate justice education tool across South Africa, Guadeloupe, and beyond.

3. Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces: A Framework for Collaborative Artistic Research

Broadly, artistic research (in various contexts, and depending on particular nuances, also referred to as Practice as Research, Practice-based Research, Practice-led Research,

Performance as Research, or Research Creation) acknowledges the epistemic dimension of artistic practices. Underlying artistic research is the notion that creative practice can reveal particular kinds of knowledge and understandings that may not become apparent through other research methods (E. Barrett & Bolt, 2007, p. 1; Farber, 2010, p. 9). Spatz (2024) notes the radical and ‘decolonising’ potential of artistic research to counter normative research paradigms and institutional and text-based scholarship. Exploring the alliance of artistic research with decolonial, Black, Indigenous, feminist, and queer studies, Spatz (2024) further offers that artistic research, as both a political and epistemological endeavour, affords ‘strategic and potentially far-reaching interventions into the structure of academia and, by extension knowledge itself and of the socially shaped material world’ (11). From a decolonial perspective, seeking ‘other’ ways of knowing, such as through artistic practices, is a way of undoing entrenched knowledge hierarchies, for ‘There is no global social justice without global cognitive justice’ (Santos, 2014, p. 42).

As an artistic research project, ToCA draws on collaborative theatre-making to position participants as co-creators in the process. Collaborative theatre-making or ‘devising’ has a long lineage. The early development of collective creation and socially engaged performance can be traced to the ‘Third World’ of the 1970s, particularly South America, in the work of pioneers like Fals Borda and Paulo Freire and activist groups such as Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Grimwood, 2022). South Africa has a history of collective labour in theatre, too. For example, in the tradition of Protest Theatre, which emerged as cultural resistance in the anti-apartheid struggle. These forms lean on a democratically organised workshop system, whereby agency and responsibility are distributed among a web of co-creators (Vass-Rhee, 2015). Collaborative theatre-making approaches have the capacity to be prefigurative (Batsleer et al., 2022) by offering a democratising, embodied, relational, and ecological process of political transformation in action. In a collective and collaborative artistic process, co-creators can enact inclusive spaces and playfully imagine alternatives to the status quo by engaging in political expression and dialogue.

ToCA works from the understanding that the arts and artistic processes are both ways of knowing and knowledge generation by inviting participants to access shared and marginalised archives, personal narratives, memories, and languages that circulate outside of dominant, hegemonic knowledges. This is further founded on the notion that collective experimentation can ‘cut across normative accounts of what it means to know’ (Manning, 2016, p. 27). We chose collaborative theatre-making as a research practice through which youth co-creators can explore their experiences of climate (in)justice to open up alternative narratives and archives, ‘other’ ways of knowing.

Furthermore, as is our particular focus of this paper, we drew from the frameworks of ‘Safe(r)’, ‘Brave(r)’, and ‘Riskier’ spaces to search for ways to establish an ethico-political basis for the practice of collaborative theatre-making. Out of this, we hope to develop educational tools for young people from Global Minority Communities to further strengthen the transnational networks of youth climate justice and cognitive justice in climate justice concerns.

That a project is collaborative does not in itself mean that all participants have an equal stake or say in it (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010). This is an insight which is drawn from the growing literature on Participatory Action Research with young people. Given the power dynamics that many young people experience in their interactions and relationships with people older than them (hooks, 2000), Youth Participatory Action Research scholars ask us to interrogate the power dynamics at play in research projects that cut across age/generation. Both scholars and the participants of their research have raised concerns—and even criticisms (Elliott, 2021)—about the possible inequities, imbalances, and even injustices amongst youth participants, academic researchers, and the wider contexts in

which they work together (Bagnoli & Clark, 2010; Mayes & Arya, 2024). Still, there is value in embarking on collaborative work of an intergenerational nature, for it ‘enables youth and adults to work collectively to theorize, question, and resist institutional and social injustices through transformational pedagogy’ (Wright, 2020, pp. 35–36).

This is an effort which we argue contributes to bolstering decolonial ecologies rooted in the Global South(s) (Ferdinand, 2019); where the racialised injustices which shape the lives and realities of French citizens in ‘overseas’ France (Guadeloupe) are obscured, ignored, and dismissed in dominant national narratives (Vergès, 2010); where the legacies of ‘Apartheid’ persist for South Africa as part of a continent hit by the sharp end of uneven global climate burden distribution (Tuana, 2019; Rice et al., 2021); and where questions of intergenerational justice can sometimes go unnoticed in the (necessary though imperfect) North/South terms framing climate justice debates (Chazan & Baldwin, 2019; Skillington, 2019).

We are not the first to use theatre-making with these goals in mind. For what we are trying to achieve with our own work, this research is indispensable. It helps us to reflect on the normative and transformative potential of artistic research and collaborative theatre-making to contribute to alternative epistemologies and drive social and political change (Bell & Pahl, 2018). It reminds us, too, of the logistical, ethical, and political challenges which intergenerational collaborative projects can be faced with (Elliott, 2021).

The existing scholarship focusing on Global South(s) contexts and communities suggests that collaborating with marginalised young people through the arts can be a powerful form of resistance against ‘the racism, ableism, sexism, heterosexism, and imperialism that manifest’ (Grimwood, 2022, p. 198) in the social and material arrangements of racialised life (Tuck & Yang, 2013). But there remain gaps still in the literature at large, specifically around collaborative theatre-making as an artistic method to generate alternative narratives—especially by exploring, documenting, and honouring the lived experiences and political propulsion of *Global Majority youth-led climate justice*. It is with this in mind that we turn to the framework offered by Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces to ground the artistic process ethically and politically. These frameworks have supported our project where young people are invited to become knowledge creators around climate change from the frontlines of this planetary crisis.

Much of the available mainstream climate education is highly technical and focused on the natural sciences. It is criticised by academics and activists for its emphasis on political impartiality, which fails to address the weight of intersectional politics, the issues of justice, and the social, economic, and political causes of the climate crisis (Sultana, 2022a). Decolonial thought points to the ways in which climate education can perpetuate universalising abstracts, totalising claims, and the political–epistemic violence of coloniality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). In this context, the ToCA project takes a politicised and decolonial approach to youth-led climate justice education, using the ethos of Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks to explore narratives and knowledges with young people about imperial, ecological, and intergenerational injustices. We do this in the specific contexts of South Africa and Guadeloupe—two lands that are facing the urgency of the climate crisis while responding to the legacies and continuations of European imperialism and colonialism (Ferdinand, 2019). Performing research in such spaces requires emancipatory methods (Freire, 1970; Bell & Pahl, 2018). But these methods cannot be deployed without a serious consideration of ethics, safety, and power (Swartz & Nyamnjoh, 2018). While this is true across all collaborative research practices, we would argue that the ‘unbearable heaviness of climate coloniality’ (Sultana, 2022b) and the threats it presents make it especially urgent to prioritise the safety of the young people at the helm of these debates. Our emphasis on ethical and political grounding leads us to our use of the Brave(r), Safe(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks, which offer the ToCA project a way of assessing the choices we

are making with our youth co-creators, as well as a framework that holds us to account as researchers.

Safe(r) Spaces frameworks are designed to minimise risk and reduce harm by creating supportive, non-judgmental, and inclusive environments for marginalised communities. However, in collaborating with young people, Brave(r) and Riskier Spaces are equally important to ensure youth co-creators, especially those from marginalised communities, feel comfortable enough to contribute to the artistic process without fear of negative consequences. We have chosen to work with Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks together as a way of shaping commitments and principles to ways of working for our youth co-creators, as they offer a strong starting point for a collaborative framework that our project seeks to build on in the South African and Guadeloupean contexts.

The Brave(r) Spaces frameworks were born out of the concept of ‘safe’ and ‘safer’ spaces. These latter safe spaces have been used in social justice and liberation movements since the 1960s. More specifically, we can trace their usage back to the LGBTQIA+ organising that led to the Stonewall riots in 1960s New York City (traditional unceded Lenape/Delaware territory). Safe and safer spaces were, at this time, also already being used by other social movements and notably, too, by social change makers and scholars active in developing queer and feminist studies (Hanhardt, 2013). But the concept has been developed since then. Social justice educators have critiqued the term as being ‘overused and undertheorised’ (B. J. Barrett, 2010, p. 1) and have thus supplemented and developed it further as ‘Braver Spaces’ (Rikard & Villarreal, 2023). In collaborative research, these Braver Spaces are designed to encourage participants to take intellectual and emotional risks and engage in challenging conversations or creative expressions. The goal is not only to provide safety but also to create an environment where participants feel supported in pushing boundaries, exploring new ideas, and confronting difficult or uncomfortable topics.

In the context of making theatre as a form of collaborative research for climate justice, Brave(r) and Safe(r) Spaces represent different approaches to creating environments that foster youth engagement, artistic practice, expression, and learning together. Both Safe(r) and Brave(r) Spaces aim to support the wellbeing and agency of participants, but they do so with distinct emphases. Neither is uncontested. Certainly, the notion of ‘Braver’ Spaces has been criticised as an approach which implies that marginalised peoples will have to do even more additional work in organising and creative settings: ‘To all those who interact with brave spaces, if the importance of this labor isn’t acknowledged then your brave space sucks’ (Zheng, 2016). Still, Rikard and Villarreal argue that ‘the impossibility of creating a true ‘safe space’ or ‘brave space’ is not an excuse to stop trying to protect our collaborators’ (Rikard & Villarreal, 2023, p. 8).

We understand that these spaces, whether Brave(r) or Safe(r), are aspirational. It is our role as researchers to support our youth co-creators to have a space in which they can be safe and brave enough to take ‘acceptable risks’ (Rikard & Villarreal, 2023). Yet, what these concepts mean in an artistic context and to our specific group of youth co-creators at ToCA has depended on the unique entanglement of their own individual social locations, biographies, and personal experiences and interactions with wider structures and contexts. We therefore explored the Safe(r)/Brave(r)/Riskier Spaces as possible frameworks for creating a shared, creative laboratory with young people responding to the climate crisis in South Africa and Guadeloupe. The next section explores some of the emerging insights shared with us by the youth co-creators of the ToCA project.

4. Co-Creation as a Method: Youth Participatory Theatre for Climate Justice

Now, an overview of the early artistic processes themselves and our initial sessions that supported them: It is these early sessions from which the data underpinning this article emerges. Within the context of our transnational project, we knew that the ways in which our individual co-creators would understand and interact with the frameworks we were interested in would be shaped by their cultures, experiences, and social settings—not least because our project unfolds in two different countries, South Africa and Guadeloupe. It was thus essential to reflect explicitly on the meaning and potential of building Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces together as an ethico-political basis for the ToCA project, insights of which we share here.

As we will see in more detail below, the co-creators in both of our groups suggest that safety, bravery, and risk are useful—even essential—concepts on which to build shared foundations of trust and solidarity in the context of an interdisciplinary artistic research project that unfolds through collaborative theatre-making.

To take our first steps in defining safety/bravery/risk as shared knowledge in our co-created spaces, we designed a series of activities to be animated in each youth group's respective first session together. These activities included group discussions, individual exercises, and arts-based activities, such as individual reflective writing, the game 'Where Do You Stand?', and explorations and games drawn from collaborative theatre-making processes such as *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Jackson & Boal, 2005). This loose programme was designed to elicit deeper insights about what these concepts might mean to our youth co-creators and how they might propose an ethos for the artistic research process. Concretely, some of the prompts that our groups responded to during their first respective sessions included the following:

- "I feel safe when. . ."
- "I feel brave when. . ."
- "I take acceptable risks when. . ."
- What does it mean to you to feel/be safe/brave/take acceptable risks?
- What are the key principles that we want commitment to from ourselves, each other, and the facilitation team? How will we monitor and evaluate our delivery on these commitments?
- What are we hoping to learn from the process and what are our next steps?

The aim of these early sessions was for the respective cohorts of youth co-creators to arrive at sets of principles to which all ToCA collaborators could adhere and be accountable to. We also intended for this set of explorations to serve as a means of reflecting on the similarities and differences between the variety of personal and collective experiences found within the respective groups in South Africa and Guadeloupe. This recognition of power and difference *within* our working settings is crucial to recognise as we address a climate crisis deeply characterised by inequalities rooted in colonial difference (Sultana, 2022b; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

From these sessions emerged a set of data—in the form of recorded oral, written, and illustrated reflections produced by the young people during the activities co-facilitated by the ToCA university/artist teams. These insights from the young people—which have already been woven throughout the early part of this article—form the basis for our analysis and insights presented below.

5. Animating Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces with Youth Co-Creators: Findings and Discussion

As we will examine in more detail in this section, our early work suggests three overarching findings. Firstly, that bravery, safety, and acceptable risk can be understood as

co-constitutive of each other. They facilitate both introspection and relational reflection. Put simply, an emphasis on all three (safety, bravery, and acceptable risk) enables young people to feel at ease as individuals but also to carefully and continuously reflect on their relationship with others in collaborative climate justice-centred spaces. Secondly, we learned that choosing to work with bravery, safety, and risk as the key architectures of a collaborative space means choosing to centre affect. In the context of making theatre as research—and as politics—this methodological choice can be understood as a feminist insistence on the radical potential of emotion and affect as both individual and collective tools for driving social (Vachhani & Pullen, 2019) and, in our view, ecological change.

Relationality similarly emerges in decolonial discourses as a principle to counter universal abstracts, political–epistemic violence, and reframe ecology and the very notion of human existence as ‘living with other living organisms’ (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 166). Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks might thus be useful tools for theatre-making processes that use affect to move people ‘from the balcony to the trenches’ (Delina, 2022) of climate action. Finally, we reflected on the theme of materiality, particularly as it emerged from the conversations with our Guadeloupean co-creators. While affect and relationality are central to the effective use of Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks, we cannot shy away from the very concrete contexts of material and financial insecurity under capitalism in which they take place. This precarity emerges from the histories (and continuities) of colonial extraction and dispossession, which maintain and reproduce barriers to feeling safe, brave, or able to take risks both in collaborative research spaces and beyond. This matters in projects where university researchers and practitioners are working with under-resourced communities, especially where state or institutional funding (especially from the Global North) is available to the researchers/practitioners.

The remainder of this section will locate these findings in the words of our co-creators as shared with us in the first sessions we organised with them around Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces.

5.1. *Bravery, Safety, and Risk as Co-Constitutive and Entangled*

Our early findings suggest that notions of safety, bravery, and acceptable risk were critical to the youth co-creators’ sense of wellbeing in the project. When given the option of exploring the possibility of creating Safe(r), Brave(r), and/or Riskier Spaces, the youth co-creators did not position them in a hierarchy. Rather, they consistently emphasised the importance of all three of these features, positioning them in a co-constitutive, even symbiotic relationship with each other.

Our co-creators situated acceptable risk as a necessary complement to balance safety, as they affirmed that calculated risks are essential for personal growth and collaborative creative work. Taking an acceptable risk was also a constituent of bravery: one could not be brave without taking risks. Hence, being brave, safe, and taking acceptable risks emerged as complementary behaviours that our co-creators saw as normative goods. In their own words,

“Bravery involves risk.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

This understanding of bravery and risk could be drawn from the experiential knowledges of our youth co-creators, stretching beyond the shared workshop spaces we were collaborating in:

“I take acceptable risks to solve my life problems.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

Further, bravery and risk could be understood as a boon to *agency*. Taken together, they enable the youth co-creators to face new challenges and conditions, such as those that we face as subjects implicated in the climate crisis:

“Bravery = taking risks, giving oneself the means to achieve an objective in spite of fear, overcoming the feeling of fear, leaving one’s comfort zone.” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

And importantly—as we will examine shortly in a brief reflection on what bravery and risk look like in educational settings—feeling safe, brave, and taking risks is about the kinds of boundaries and preparations made by *all* parties sharing a collaborative space, not just an individual:

“I feel safe when my limits are respected. When there is a clear framework, I feel good and at ease. I feel brave when I am facing my fears, when I accept the unknown while getting out of my comfort zone. I feel I take acceptable risks when I evaluate the risk, while there are measures to protect my safety put in place through adequate preparation.” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

Bravery is co-constitutive of acceptable risk. Our co-creators suggest that facing up to risks in an everyday context necessitates bravery. And, indeed, operating in climate-vulnerable contexts means everyday life is already riddled with both social and ecological risk. Responding to this risk is brave and necessary—no matter the scale at which it articulates itself. Though this may seem obvious or intuitive, it is an important insight, for it reaffirms and reinforces the symbiotic, rather than adversarial, relationship amongst the concepts of Brave(r), Safe(r), and Riskier Spaces. Our youth co-creators demand that we attend to the deep entanglement of bravery, safety, and risk—rather than choosing bravery over safety or vice versa, as the debate is often framed. An explicit animation of these concepts in tandem with each other is useful and necessary for participatory researchers and arts practitioners seeking to facilitate equitable yet generative spaces of collaboration with young people.

5.2. Calculating (Acceptable) Risk as a Relational Practice

While risk was combined with bravery and safety, youth co-creators recognised that these risks had to be calculated and considered. This consideration and calculation is what makes risks acceptable and situates them as acts of bravery as opposed to—in the words of one of our Guadeloupean co-creators, stupidity (“Bravery is not equal to stupidity”—Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe). This process of acceptable risk-taking makes the use of Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks a relational practice, both in terms of how we relate to each other and our shifting locations. Relationality emerges as a key concept across discourses in decoloniality, Black, Indigenous, and feminist studies. Indigenous communities and scholars, for instance, reframe dominant and colonially informed conceptions of human existence by the meaningful nature of the relationships we cultivate with each other and the land (Wildcat & Voth, 2023).

Who we are, the worlds we hope to create, and how we practice relating to each other are bound up together (ibid)—thus making reflections on the consequences to our actions worthy of continued introspection, especially as we seek climate justice. We see this articulated in the reflections of our co-creators, even if not framed by them as such:

“Acceptable risk is knowing that it’s a risk that you’re ready to deal with consequences.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

“I take acceptable risks to protect others.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

“What is safety? What is bravery? Taking acceptable risks? It is not being violent, not giving non-constructive critiques. It is having a good spirit and confidence. It is being at ease. It is knowing how to say things.” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

To some extent, the frameworks discussed here encourage introspection, and as we will see shortly, this can manifest in feelings of permission to be oneself in the collaborative space. Still, taking acceptable risks was firmly situated by our co-creators as a social (read: relational) act. The act of taking risks can affect others—negatively or positively. Risks might protect—or harm—them. The potential consequences are thus manifold. Recognising this, young people involved in processes and communities seeking change express their agency as they calculate these risks in relation to the social dynamics which shape and are shaped by the risks they take in collaborative spaces. The emphasis on taking an acceptable risk foregrounds the delicate and shifting power dynamics that regulate collaborative and participatory spaces such as the ToCA project. Indeed, these risks can simultaneously produce feelings of safety for some, while they create insecurity for others in the same shared space:

“Is this space ever really safe? If you create a safe space, what does that really mean? For who?” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

We might say that this contradiction mirrors some of the dynamics and debates at play in climate politics—where green transitions are proposed in specific regions at the expense of others. This dynamic, which, by no coincidence, plays out along the lines of North/South inequalities, has been dubbed ‘climate coloniality’ (Sultana, 2022b). But as our youth co-creators observe in the local context of our own project, safety (or if we push this even further, justice or emancipation) cannot be meaningful when secured at the expense of others. And so, young people are aware of the tensions and contradictions that emerge within our own collaborative climate justice spaces as we try to take acceptable risks and co-create spaces that are Brave(r) and/or Safe(r). It is through this meaningful animation of bravery, safety, and acceptable risk, which is attentive to relations of power within our own collaborative space, that we become able to respond to the historical and current power dynamics that manifest in the climate crisis. Exploring these dynamics through notions of safety, bravery, and acceptable risk simultaneously further opens the possibilities to reflect and act on the messy, entangled nature of our evolving relationships as we co-create theatrical work on climate justice.

Young people were also conscious that taking acceptable risks and being brave did not need to mean taking the ‘biggest’ risks with the highest stakes. Rather, taking (acceptable) risks and being brave within the context of a collaborative theatre-making research project was framed as being about taking the ‘smaller’, often less publicly visible, steps towards acts of (acceptable) risk and bravery. In their words,

“It’s not always about doing the biggest risk or taking the biggest risks. It’s about even doing the small things. . . you waking up, you not giving up on yourself each and every day.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

“You don’t have to go and fight a war and be brave; just the little things.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

These ‘little’ things are not always the most visible, high-risk gestures that take up public space. But such acts of resistance remain potent nonetheless as disability and feminist studies, among other areas of thought, have taught us (Butler, 2015; Hedva, 2016). As such, our embrace of the Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks enables us to support our youth co-creators in articulating an ‘environmentalism of everyday life’ (Peña, 2005). It is thus in the ‘mundane matters’ (Enloe, 2011) of spaces which start with lived experiences that marginalised communities can describe, speak back to, and push back against the status quo of extractivism, hierarchy, and domination. And, indeed, the use of these frameworks means that they take these risks in spaces where their safety and wellbeing are prioritised and respected—for the acceptable nature of the risk remains

paramount. Where our co-creators recognised the impact of ‘small’ risks in forging Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces, they insisted that this risk was never a careless or unmeasured risk. To come back to an affirmation from one of our Guadeloupean co-creators, ‘Bravery is not equal to stupidity’.

As researchers and educators, we might reflect, too, on one of the spaces in which we often find ourselves in contact with young people: education. How might we work against extractivism, hierarchy, and domination to better support youth climate action? And what role might the kinds of risk-taking explored by our youth co-creators play in this? Indeed, our classrooms and educational policies often perpetuate risk aversion (hooks, 1994). But perhaps we might see these ‘smaller’ risks as ways—strategies—that take us towards the larger (necessary) risks that seek and support social transformation and climate justice. In other words, young people’s small risks might be understood as prefigurative of larger risks—and as invitations and reminders to educators of the kinds of risks that *we* need to take to support this prefiguration. As bell hooks reminds us, youth ‘empowerment cannot happen if we [teachers and educators] refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks’ (hooks, 1994, p. 21). To avoid coercing students into taking risks, then, we should ‘not expect students to take any risks that [we] would not take, to share in any way that [we] would not share’ (hooks, 1994, p. 21). Rather, we might construct and step into bravery, safety, and acceptable risk together—acknowledging that we are *all* implicated in questions of climate justice and must *all* respond to it (even if our roles and experiences within it vary).

Upon reflection, then, we might see the simultaneous role of bravery / safety / acceptable risk as a tool to draw the agreed boundaries of our shared theatre-making process—without, as much as possible, limiting the imaginative potentials of our young collaborators to envision and embody the kinds of politics and relationships (or ‘relationalities’) that prefigure alternative social and environmental futures.

5.3. *Affect and Reflexivity in Brave(r), Safe(r), and Riskier Spaces*

As mentioned previously, working with the Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks facilitated a simultaneous movement towards introspection and reflections on relationality. This simultaneous movement was also deeply implicated in affect, or emotion, both in terms of individual and collective affect. Discussions rooted the concept of bravery in feelings of vulnerability. This theme aligns with the aim of fostering an environment where individuals feel able to carry and express themselves honestly and take risks without fear of judgement. Youth co-creators expressed that bravery involves overcoming fears and being open about one’s emotions:

“Being brave is taking steps even though you don’t know where it might take you. . . taking action even though the location might be unknown.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

These feelings may lead us *to* and *through* our vulnerabilities:

“I feel brave when I cry. Become vulnerable.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

“I feel brave when I overcome my fears.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

Safety was closely linked to a feeling of freedom to be or express oneself. Youth co-creators tended to feel safe when they felt that they had total space to express their thoughts and feelings, to embody and embrace their senses of selfhood. In their words,

“Safety means letting your guard [down]. Allow[ing] yourself to be vulnerable in spaces. . .” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

“I feel safe when I’m allowed to be myself.” (Youth co-creator, South Africa)

Still, these feelings of safety are contingent. They are not absolute nor a given. The relationships that youth co-creators have to the places they inhabit are crucial:

“Safety varies from place to place. And this is what makes me feel safe is having a warm feeling and being very much aware of which room I’m at, where I’m at.”
(Youth co-creator, South Africa)

“Safety = comfort zone, out of danger, without anxiety or nervousness, free self-expression, feeling at ease.” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

The themes of safety and selfhood that emerge are crucial for creating an inclusive and supportive environment where all members feel valued and respected. Again, this centring of affect was articulated in a relational way. Not only were co-creators concerned with their own freedom to articulate their sense of selfhood, but they also insisted that this freedom was extended to each individual who was part of the space. At the same time, they tended to want to be open and vulnerable in their interactions, which is not a central pillar of a ‘safe space’.

5.4. Acknowledging the Materiality of Spaces

We recognise the centrality of affect and relationality to the effective use of Safe(r), Brave(r), and Riskier Spaces frameworks. Yet, we cannot shy away from the very concrete contexts of material and financial insecurity that produce barriers to using these frameworks well in collaborative research spaces and beyond. In no uncertain terms, our youth co-creators spoke to the material nature of safety:

“Safety -> mood/environment; financial (being at ease without struggling); being able to question oneself; physical (no physical, non-consensual violence).” (Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

Safety is not simply about a sense of identity or selfhood—it is also about meeting material needs, which form the basis for the former:

“Safety is when I can meet my principal needs. When I have a feeling of wellness and being out of danger.”

(Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

Without a doubt, safety is in large part (though not exclusively) about materiality:

“Safety/security: I feel secure/safe when I receive my payslip.”

(Youth co-creator, Guadeloupe)

This matters in projects where university researchers and practitioners are working with under-resourced communities, especially where the former’s activities are being funded. This was a particularly important question for our team, which included researchers from/based in Global North contexts. Our funding, too, came from an institution based in a Northern country, the former imperial core of the UK (SOAS, University of London)—a material dynamic which other climate justice-oriented projects may well be operating on.

Although our decision to pay our young people for their time was factored into our initial grant application (i.e., before we had access to the insights from the research that it ultimately funded), the emergent findings from this project confirm and reaffirm the importance of taking into account the material securities and insecurities which contribute to making a space safe(r), brave(r), and within the bounds of acceptable risk. It goes without saying that climate justice is a deeply *material*—not post-material—issue. Any project responding to climate justice must thus account for this. This is an important, too often under-emphasised, aspect of creating and sustaining equitable and secure collaboration with young people. And it is particularly prescient as we recognise the profound

materiality of climate change as an issue shaping and reshaping Global South communities and ecologies.

6. Conclusions: Towards an Ethos for a Theatre of Climate Action

We return to the question posed by one of our South African youth co-creators in response to the Safe(r) Spaces framework: “Can you be safe and brave?”. The contradictions within and across these frameworks raised useful questions such as this one, resulting in a more constructive foundation of principles and commitments for the collaborative processes. Focusing on one specific element of these frameworks (i.e., bravery, safety, risk) alone is not enough. Youth co-creators emphasised the co-constitutive nature of all three of these frameworks. They recognised the need for creating hybrid approaches to facilitate and support their “other” ways of knowing, which drove our artistic collaborations.

In order to recognise marginalised voices at the frontlines of the climate crisis, ToCA draws from artistic research as a methodology that affords possibilities to counter hegemonic archives, narratives, experiences, and epistemologies. Collaborative theatre-making offers a democratic and relational space for such encounters and for co-creators in research processes to become knowledge creators. Democracy, relationality, and equal participation, however, cannot be assumed. Through our work in ToCA, we have found that Brave(r), Safe(r), and Riskier Spaces created an ethico-political ground for artistic research, and specifically here, collaborative theatre-making as knowledge interventions in the world.

As emphasised above, research processes led by creative collaboration can be processes of democratisation. Still, these processes cannot be extricated from the world in which they take place. This means that they can be—and often are—still limited in terms of the power they can harness to radically transform relations of power at large. Yet, artistic collaboration remains a source of motivation and even excitement for researchers, artists, and young people seeking other, better worlds.

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Abbreviation

The following abbreviation is used in this manuscript:

ToCA Theatre of Climate Action

Note

- ¹ While recognising the warnings of other scholars, we are critical and cautious of using the term ‘Global South’ in a geographically deterministic way (Rosa, 2014; Hollington et al., 2015), we use the term ‘Global South’ as a geographical companion to ‘Global Majority’ (Oppong & Dombroski, 2024). The latter term is used to refer to the *people who make up the majority of the world* that do of not consider themselves to be White. As with the usage of Global South as a political term, the Global Majority can be situated anywhere geographically (i.e., we recognise that Global Majority communities are born in and also migrate to the regions we know as the Global North).

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Article

Pacific Youth Activists Encountering Climate Change: Implications for Education

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Abstract

The vulnerability of many Pacific communities is impacted by rising sea levels and exposure to extreme weather patterns. This qualitative research study was conducted with focus groups of Māori and Pacific youth in Aotearoa New Zealand. I am a Pacific researcher, and I examine research and report on findings from Pacific youth focus groups. Employing a Talanoa methodology, a key question posed was how educators in Aotearoa New Zealand supported the wellbeing of Pacific youth in the face of increasing climate extremes within their schools and communities. Engaging a Pacific values framework, this discussion emphasizes the critical role of teachers and education in eliminating concerns, working collectively, listening respectfully, and collaborating with Pacific youth in confronting the complexity of issues surrounding climate change, thereby creating a shift from a position of despair and helplessness to a place of hope and optimism. Findings from the study reveal that, in the education sector, climate change is not well addressed, teachers could do more to acknowledge and address climate crises faced in the Pacific region in the curriculum, and little attention is paid to the wellbeing of Pacific youth facing climate change in the Pacific. An implication is that teachers need to support Pacific youth and understand that education about climatic variance affects Pacific learners' wellbeing.

Keywords: pacific; students; activism; climate change; education; wellbeing

1. Introduction

Successfully adapting to changes in the climate is arguably one of the most complex challenges Pacific People will have to face this century (Longman, 2024). Contemporary times are hallmarked by uncertainty and heightened anxiety as the global community grapples with the overwhelming issue of climate change and the forecast implications of climate extremes. Too frequently a Western bias pervades the discourse, dislocating and marginalizing Indigenous communities whilst sidelining the very populace who are most frequently living in the literal 'eye of the storm' (Renwick, 2020). The challenges perpetuated by climate change are complex, interwoven and will manifest more rapidly in vulnerable environments and societies (IPCC, 2014), and Pacific Peoples; environments are acutely vulnerable (Lata & Nunn, 2012). This study is situated within the discourse on climate change in the Pacific, drawing on the voices of Pacific youth and the role of education in responding to the genuine concerns expressed.

"Climate change is the ultimate injustice," said Ani Dasgupta, the president of the World Resources Institute, an environmental group (Dasgupta, 2024, p. 2). "People with the fewest resources, those least responsible for the climate crisis, bear the brunt of climate impacts." He added, "If you do not live in a hot spot, imagine instead a roof blown away,

a village well overwhelmed by salt water, a failed crop, a job lost, a meal skipped—all at once, again and again.”

Overlaid with this concern is the sincere aspiration for hopeful solutions, as explained by speakers at the recent Pacific Climate summit held in Apia in 2024. Notably, climate change education for Pacific youth is pivotal. Education plays a prime role in working with students who experience trauma related to climate crises. Nations and communities are increasingly impacted by climatic devastation, and schools are called upon to assist children in their care to process and recover from events (Mutch & Latai, 2019).

In parallel, the Pacific community is among the fastest-growing demographics in Aotearoa New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2017), partly and significantly due to climate-related migration. Despite the increased population, educational practices, policies, and regulatory frameworks have not kept pace with the cultural, linguistic, social and well-being needs of Pacific youth (Glasgow, 2022). This has had an adverse effect on their health, wellbeing, identity and sense of self-worth (DPMC, 2019; Ministry of Social Development, 2024). The Ministry of Education’s (2019) brief on best practice for teaching Pacific learners acknowledges that the education system is, in fact, “failing many Pacific learners” (p. 2). Learner identity is enhanced when teachers are responsive to cultural ways of knowing and being (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 12). Notably, there is a disconnect where teaching practices do not align with Pacific cultural life-worlds. It is essential; therefore, that teachers’ practices are strengthened to embody cultural understandings (Rameka & Glasgow, 2017) in discussions of Pacific students’ wider worlds.

Overview

This article shares the voices of Pacific youth in Aotearoa New Zealand, gathered through the methodology of Talanoa in 2021. These are the children of the Pacific Diaspora. They voice their concerns, emotional responses, hopes, and aspirations, and the challenges faced within an education system that has dislocated and disempowered Pacific youth, and among educators who fail to adequately address these concerns in classroom teaching. In the following section, I situate myself as a Pacific educator and researcher. I then introduce the Aotearoa New Zealand context and previous work with Pacific Island students in Aotearoa New Zealand. Subsequently, I follow with a description of the Pacific values framework and Talanoa methods, before considering the findings and discussion.

2. Pacific Regional Context

This research is located within the wider Pacific Region, with nations that are at supreme risk of degradation and loss because of change. Renwick (2020) states that the risks and challenges from climate change are acute and notes that Pacific nations are in ‘the eye of the storm’. In the Pacific region, sea level rise is higher than the global average, rainfall variability is set to increase dramatically, the tropical cyclone season is lengthening, and the most powerful storms are becoming more frequent. Many communities live on low-lying clusters of islands, which are especially prone to the effects of sea level rise. While Pacific nations have done very little to cause the climate change problem, they are very much at the forefront of suffering the consequences. The oceans are acidifying, and temperature extremes are noted, with sea surface temperatures in the southwestern Pacific having risen three times faster than the global average since 1980 (WMA, 2024). Rainfall variability is increasing, sea level rise is occurring faster than the global average in a region where many populations live close to sea level, and tropical cyclones are becoming more intense. All these factors, according to Renwick (2020), raise the likelihood of extreme, damaging events, from coastal inundation to drought and crop failures, to unprecedented storm damage and torrential rains. The changing climate, brought about by

human-induced greenhouse gas emissions, is affecting all aspects of the climate across the southwest Pacific and the globe. The oceans are soaking up the bulk of the heat—at least 90 per cent (IPCC, 2014)—and around a third of the carbon dioxide emitted from fossil fuel burning. Consequently, sea levels are rising, and the pH of ocean waters is decreasing (known as ocean acidification).

From an Indigenous Polynesian perspective, a spiritual relational dimension is frequently absent from Western scientific discourse. Relationality is a key consideration between the natural and supernatural world, and between human and non-human entities. Relationality is important, and from an Indigenous Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) framework, human and non-human share genealogy. However, in a conventional Western worldview, such genealogical links are dismantled and deemed irrelevant (Ritchie et al., 2022). Pacific youth are exposed to an education system generally taught by teachers from Western backgrounds, bound by Western philosophies and theory, and are at risk of marginalization when Pacific cultural tenets are denigrated.

Pacific youth across Oceania are becoming climate activists through education, gaining confidence to speak back to government interventions, policies and practices that undermine their fundamental human rights. These rights include the choice to live on one's own land and preserve this land for themselves and future generations. Pacific youth activism embraces collaboration, participation, and action-oriented strategies to address concerns and actively seek measures for transformation.

3. My Background

I am Cook Islands Māori, a first-generation New Zealander whose ancestors hail from Penhryn, or Tongareva (its Indigenous name) atoll, an atoll in the Northern group. I also have links to Tahiti and Rurutu in the Austral Islands in the South Pacific. For generations, the people of Penhryn have eked out, at times, a precarious living, adapting to and surviving on the rim of a sunken volcano. Our relationship with nature is intertwined with our identity. Our names reflect our environment, such as Takurangi (my heaven), Tangaroa, (God of the sea), and Pōhatu (strong, solid rock), indicating the personification and supreme importance of such phenomena in our lives and wellbeing. Penhryn is my Turangavaevae (resting place). It is where my parents and brother are buried, overlooking the lagoon at Motukoiti, our ancestral lands. Penhryn is 1372 km from the main island of Rarotonga. The considerable distance from central government has meant that decisions are made by those in power in Rarotonga and may result in far-reaching repercussions for those who live on the margins. Recently, for example, the Cook Islands Prime Minister signed a five-year agreement for seabed and mineral exploration and research with the Chinese government to mine for minerals within the Penhryn Ocean basin (Crimp, 2025, Radio New Zealand) These negotiations were carried out with scant consultation with Cook Islands communities, including the Penhryn community, who are most at risk. Such ventures encroach on living spaces and contribute to the degradation of traditional food sources from the ocean and livelihoods.

I am also a Pacific teacher and teacher educator in Aotearoa New Zealand. A central premise that underpins my discussion is that New Zealand teachers in Aotearoa are ill-prepared to respond to Pacific learners and are inadequately informed of the wider contextual issues of climate change, particularly in the region of Oceania. A key policy document, Action Plan for Pacific Education 2020—2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020b), noted the journey ahead and the gaps in teaching practice for non-Pacific teachers. Foremost are the complex issues of racism and discrimination, which require immediate attention to ensure that every teacher is the best teacher for Pacific learners. Deconstructing personal and professional bias for teachers can be confronting and takes time. Bringing into sharp

focus the challenges encountered around climate change is less likely to be considered, let alone foregrounded, by New Zealand teachers in the short term.

4. Aotearoa New Zealand Educational Context

The demographic profile of Pacific peoples is youthful, with a median age of 22 years (DPMC, 2019). The Pacific population comprises new migrants and multiple generations born in New Zealand, which presents an evolving, complex set of Pacific identities for its children and youth. There is an emerging collective Pacific identity in New Zealand, as well as a resurgence of individual Pacific cultures. The wellbeing of Pacific peoples is characterized by family, faith and culture. Legacy appears to be an important feature of Pacific communities, reinforced by the importance of a good education and contributing to cultural ventures (p. 9).

To assist students in preparing for climate change, the Ministry of Education (2020b) has prepared a program, The Climate Change: Prepare Today, Live Well Tomorrow program. This resource guides teachers in the critical task of preparing students to meet the challenges of climate change. Key aspects include developing scientific knowledge and a focus on wellbeing, whilst also advocating for personal action. Significantly, Eames (2017) identifies that 66% of teachers in an Aotearoa New Zealand NZCER survey responded that they do not find it challenging to address climate issues in their classrooms. Bolstad (2020) notes that teachers discussed the need to ensure that they present opportunities and optimism rather than a dire future, and that negativity, doom and gloom messaging is unhelpful and can further compound anxiety issues for students. Such discourse alienates Pacific youth whose families, communities and nations are at the interface of climate disaster. Educator ignorance and denial compound division and misunderstanding and establish unsafe relationships between cultural groups. Furthermore, Clayton et al. (2017) suggest that young people identified climate change as negatively impacting their personal sense of self (p. 41). Further approaches need to be considered to provide pedagogical models for teachers. One such approach is outlined in Kirby and Webb's (2021, p. 134) British study, which suggests that teachers implementing a democratic and transformative approach with students can open up the scope of engaging with issues of adapting to, and living with, the ontological uncertainties of human-induced climate change, whilst also outlining the tensions and complexities of how to act within and beyond school. What has become apparent from discussions with Pacific youth in New Zealand in my study is that teachers could be more invested in the wellbeing of Pacific youth, regardless of the advent of increasing climate degradation and destruction.

Ritchie et al. (2022 study) noted that:

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal, SDG4.7 necessitates governments to ensure that by 2030, all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development including, alongside others, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2017, p. 8)

Findings from this research reveal that what happens in the classroom can enable or impede, health and wellbeing for Pacific youth and families (Ritchie et al., 2022). It is essential to Pacific youth's wellbeing and learning that teachers have a meaningful intercultural understanding of key Pacific cultural concepts. Within educational contexts, "racism in both overt and less conspicuous forms, pervades the educational system, and is a significant barrier to wellbeing, belonging and achievement of Pacific youth and their families" (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 3).

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2017) is currently being refreshed, and it is to be hoped that recognition of the current converging climate, COVID-19, social inequity, and biodiversity crises will lead to a stronger focus on the need for education that encourages students to critically examine and respond with hope to social, cultural, economic and ecological issues. Adding to this agenda is a strong focus on Indigenous Pacific peoples' cultural sustainability in the face of highly variable climatic conditions, and, importantly, an emphasis on teaching and learning about climate change.

This work will improve community resilience by addressing inequities in learning outcomes that impact lifelong wellbeing. It will support early learning services, schools and kura [schools teaching with a Māori philosophy and in the medium of the Māori language] to include an understanding of, and responses to, climate change in their local curricula and marau ā-kura (living, breathing curriculum), as well as learning that is important for social cohesion. The aim is to support all children and young people to grow as lifelong learners who are connected to the environment and their communities, and actively involved in a sustainable future. (Ministry for the Environment, 2022, p. 148)

Hitherto, insufficient attention has been given to providing professional guidance for teachers. To remedy this gap, Future Curious, an education consultancy, developed a guide for educators on climate change aimed primarily at children aged 11–14 (Ritchie et al., 2022). When the program was recently revised, the authors of this article were commissioned to produce a new wellbeing guide to support the delivery of this climate education program (Ritchie et al., 2022).

Teachers have little comprehension of the heightened anxiety and fear that Pacific youth experience in response to the increasing crises experienced across the Pacific Ocean and the Pacific Islands states, which are at extreme risk. There are fewer than 3% Pacific teachers in the teaching profession in Aotearoa, resulting in less focus and attention being paid to Pacific issues across the curriculum. This notion is reinforced by Rimoni et al. (2022), who found that non-Pacific teachers viewed Pacific values as more superficial and of little concern, whereas for Pacific teachers, Pacific values were felt more deeply and practiced across all areas of everyday lives.

5. Research Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a wider Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington and New Zealand Ministry of Education-funded research study (Ritchie et al., 2022) looking into climate change and sustainability for youth in Aotearoa, across three cohort youth groups: one Pakeha (European), one Māori (Indigenous New Zealanders) and one Pacific cohort. I worked closely with Pacific youth in my role as Pacific researcher and held Talanoa sessions, which are a recognized and practiced Pacific data-gathering methodology (Vaiolleti, 2006). Talanoa means to 'tala' (talk) about 'noa' (normal things). Vaiolleti defines Talanoa as a personal encounter where people tell their issues, their realities, and aspirations (Ministry of Education, 2024). Throughout this process, which is inclusive, participatory, and transparent, space is created for discussion. Talanoa is crucial to ensure that "silent, invisible voices" are heard and collected in an authentically Pacific way, and that Pacific approaches are valued (Ministry of Education, 2025, p. 17).

This article draws on qualitative research using the Pacific methodology of Talanoa (conversations), Glasgow (2019), conducted in 2021 with a cross-section of six Pacific youth in Poneke, Wellington, the capital city of New Zealand Aotearoa, ranging from 9 to 18 years of age. Researcher involvement and Pacific Island community connections underpinned and enabled the recruitment of Pacific youth participants. Talanoa group sessions were held in two locations, the Hutt Valley and Porirua, both outer suburbs of the Wellington

region, with two groups of student participants comprising four and two participants, respectively. The participants are Pacific youth of the diaspora, New Zealand-born and either first-, second- or third-generation New Zealanders. Their homelands are Samoa, Niue, and the Cook Islands. Whilst all but two children had never set foot in their traditional cultural homelands, they all retain a strong emotional pull, sense of identity and connection to their respective Pacific nations' homeland. In the Porirua cohort, the four students were 10–12 years of age. Three were New Zealand-born Samoan children, and one 10-year-old male was New Zealand-born of Niuean descent. In the Hutt valley group, the Talanoa consisted of two New Zealand-born of Pacific students of Cook Islands descent. They were a 9-year-old male and an 18-year-old female (A). Due to the collective nature of Talanoa data-gathering sessions, attention is paid to the interactive conversation and the process, and less to the individualistic focus of the research process; therefore, participant contributions are considered collective ventures and are not individually identified in the findings. Furthermore, the presence of others within the group adds support to the Talanoa session, and silence, a key aspect of *le vā*, is an important consideration.

In this article, it is the voice of the 18-year-old Pacific student (A) that has been selected from the Talanoa sessions. Her responses and ideas portrayed a powerful narrative, and when discussed with the younger members of the Pacific cohort, there was agreement expressed on A's ideas, viewpoints and reflections. She depicted the crisis for Pacific students in Aotearoa with eloquence. Significantly, she drew on understandings from a place of shared experience, the plight and plea of Pacific students in an education system that pays scant regard to the cultural worlds of Pacific students. She was also able to describe ways of engaging in how to overcome or at least feel a sense of control in a fraught situation. One comment is drawn from the wider study, where one of the Pakeha European students commented about the perceived 'white saviourism' perpetuated in the classroom around Pacific climate change, indicating that youth in Aotearoa are building strong climate activist inclinations despite gaps in the education system,

Talanoa is recognized and promoted as an authentic research method and methodology by the Ministry of Education in Aotearoa (Ministry of Education, 2018) for research with Pacific Island communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. In keeping with Talanoa research guidelines, attending to participant wellbeing was paramount. Practices adhered to cultural protocols, ensuring that the location for Talanoa was suitable, including the recitation of *lotu* (prayers) to begin the Talanoa, and reciting *lotu* before the sharing of food and drink. Once formalities were completed, connections and relationships were strengthened, and participants were free to express their ideas around key areas, with fluidity of timeframes. Weaving in the concept of the *vā*, (time and space) into the Talanoa process respects, nurtures and maintains the space within relationships, and allows for opportunities for knowledge, queries, experiences, and observations to be shared (Ministry of Education, 2025).

Furthermore, Parsons et al. (2024) note that youth participants in their study reported how participation in various forms of climate activism helped to reduce their eco-anxiety and made them more hopeful about their collective abilities to address climate change. Ultimately, their strong links to Pacific families, values and connections across the Pacific pervaded their thoughts and aspirations and shaped their actions.

6. Pacific Values Framework

This research is underpinned by the Pacific Values framework, which underpins the Talanoa methodology (Rimoni et al., 2022). Talanoa sessions were framed by the Pacific values framework of spirituality, respect, leadership, service, family, reciprocal relationships, inclusion, love and belonging (Ministry of Education, 2018; Rimoni et al., 2022). In this

way, students were able to connect to their cultural backgrounds in the research process, which connects strongly to the values identified as vital to support the holistic learning and development of Pacific learners. This framework drives the research as it emphasizes and privileges the place of values, connecting to and respecting the environment, linking to family in both Aotearoa and the wider Pacific homelands, and privileging and practicing reciprocity in relationality. Talanoa were framed around and guided by Pacific values, with a spiritual blessing to begin Talanoa, relationships and connections to homelands and Te Moana Nui a Kiva (Pacific Ocean), establishing a space of belonging and inclusion for participants, and by ensuring le vā (time and space) was closely protected and valued. Such research practice enabled a departure from Western methodologies and indicated to participants that Pacific culture, ways of being and ways of doing are valuable and requisite to the research platform.

Rangimarie Rose Pere's Te Wheke (Octopus) theoretical framework (Pere, 1988) embodies factors important for the overall health of the Pacific person. Te Wheke swims the oceans, and each of its tentacles needs to be well nourished in the physical, social, emotional, spiritual, cognitive dimensions, within strong family and community connections is supported, alongside other dimensions. A key principle of the framework denotes the importance of nature and aligning our lives with the natural world to nourish social, economic, environmental, cultural and spiritual realms, noting the emphasis of the environment on the child. The Te Wheke framework asserts that all these factors require attending equally to ensure one's holistic wellbeing is maintained. Both frameworks act as guides and reflective tools for critiquing and improving educational experiences for Pacific students. Foregrounding such concepts as the cultural and spiritual effects on health and wellbeing will elucidate, enlighten and create inclusive and respectful learning spaces for students.

7. Findings

In this section, I outline findings from Talanoa conducted with Pacific youth. I weave a reflective commentary alongside the selected Pacific voices and link them to Pacific values within the framework to provide coherent links across the discussion.

7.1. Te Moana Nui a Kiva

Talanoa conducted with Pacific youth discussed their connections to the Pacific Ocean and the importance of the natural and cultural world to their sense of wellbeing. Pacific youth were extremely concerned, noting that teachers' in-attention, or complete disregard of climate change issues and sea level rise, was frequently dealt with in an off-hand and ineffectual manner. Whilst concerns were noted, Pacific youth also recognized their commitment to seeking to make a difference whilst affirming cultural and emotional connections.

'You know, extreme risk of sea level rising that you feel that wellbeing or you know some of those considerations. I think for Māori and in Pacifica culture from a young age you're taught that you're very connected to the ocean. Just you know that earth in general, Mother Nature, and so you preserve and look after that . . . As you're growing up, you still learn about those things. And you learn that it's an important aspect of it, and it makes you feel more connected as a person, sure, which I think affects your wellbeing, because you know you have the emotional connection to it, yes, that makes you feel like you are making a difference'.

This insightful comment reveals the depth of engagement with the natural world and the connection to the Pacific Ocean, which connects the island archipelago throughout the region. Further alignments are made to the values of love, family, service and spirituality

7.2. Encountering Teacher Racism

Pacific learners and their families encounter racism when teachers are ill-prepared to teach topics outside their realm of understanding.

Students responded with heartfelt comments and aspirations across a range of areas. An example of such racism was described as white saviorism regarding a social studies project that had been set in class:

‘Also, the white saviourism in some of the classes, that would be incredibly visible to the point like one when we learned about climate change in year ten [age 14]. We had to do an investigation into how to help the Pacific Islands and different solutions, mitigation solutions to climate change in the Pacific, and first of all, the way it was done could have been incredibly triggering to anyone who was Pasifica . . . without acknowledging that there wasn’t anything about their connections to the land’. And the idea of asking 14-year-old white students who have no idea what it is like living in these places to do their own very limited research without any kinds of direction as to ‘Hey we’re going to go look at these people who have talked about this, who are living in these islands, and this is the work that they’re doing on mitigation’. There was nothing of that . . . And again, it’s that kind of systemic racism in the sense that it’s erasing these different cultures’ worldviews, perspectives and traditions and everything and so anything in terms of wellbeing in terms of climate change has to change that, in the sense that it has to be from a te ao Māori worldview [and] incorporating Pacific Island values and knowledge throughout.’

7.3. Seeking Out Other Avenues for Learning

Youths perceived and reflected on ways that content can be delivered devoid of the cultural significance of the land and traditional practices. They indicated that it seemed a disconnected perception by Western-trained teachers from a wider, more culturally located view. A lack of understanding by teachers has necessitated students seek out other avenues to become acquainted with climate challenges and to foster heightened awareness. These avenues were found outside mainstream teaching, such as youth and cultural groups.

‘We weren’t taught about it in schools, so I ended up joining the school strike and learning about climate change and protest because I felt like we weren’t doing enough (at school) to try and prevent it and I found that was really—I mean it sparked my interest in it’.

Further guidance is required and sought by Pacific youth to stem their sense of isolation and to provide a platform to share their issues and concerns.

‘In New Zealand right, just by giving them someone to listen to like a teacher that they trust and then having a community they can talk to about it and share their ideas and thoughts and feelings on it, rather than being left alone’

Pacific learners could see that having a trusted adult who was willing to foster relationship building, spending time listening to student concerns, and with whom they felt safe was a prime consideration.

7.4. Re-Visiting Pacific Traditional Ways Outside Mainstream Schooling

Reviewing and re-enacting traditional Pacific ways to build resilience in regard to sea level rise and changing climatic conditions were seen to be crucial by participants. Traditional concepts and practices formerly discarded in the mainstream Western arena are sought out to build a repertoire of responses. Pacific youth foregrounded traditional ways of preserving our environments. The young people explain:

‘There is always ways that you can do this and let’s come back with local examples and stuff that there are people that are relatable that have done things. Even when you are not part of the community (over there) as you are growing up you still learn about those things’.

‘It makes you feel more connected which affects your wellbeing because you know you have the emotional connection, but this gives a sense of making a contribution in your own ways’.

‘Having a positive outlook and looking at strategies is a really helpful thing for me, because it is our future, and when I know I have a sense of control over making changes you know within your capabilities, things don’t seem so dire’.

8. Implications

This section outlines the implications in three key areas: implications for educational policy, teacher training and the importance of responding to Pacific youth perspectives

Implications in the policy arena reveal that significant educational policy and processes are undoubtedly required and need to be mandated (Eames, 2017) to realign and bolster teacher pedagogy, allay Pacific children’s fears, and rail against a prominent educational paradigm that, according to Bryan (2020, p. 23), “to privilege the rational and cognitive aspects of teaching and learning and perceive emotion to be peripheral or irrelevant to education”. Moreover, on a broader scale, societies should confront such pressing and ever-increasing concerns (Bryan, 2020).

Furthermore, wellbeing initiatives have been developed by government departments. The Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, developed in 2019 by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), created a vision for New Zealand to be the best place in the world for children. This aligns with the wellbeing budget and work carried out by the government to address child poverty, family violence, inadequate housing and to improve learning support and mental wellbeing for children, young people and their families and whānau.

Whilst the Pacific Education Action Plan (Ministry of Education, 2020a) foregrounds the aspiration to work together in the educational sphere to support Pacific children’s learning and wellbeing, there continues to be significant gaps in ITE educational programs. Consequently, Pacific youth are less likely to be taught by Pacific teachers and more likely to be taught by non- Pacific teachers, who may be less able to attend to and support Pacific learners’ cultural and holistic learning and development. Ultimately, the indication is that many New Zealand educators lack deep pedagogical understandings of Pacific cultural knowledge and the ability to engage with and nurture Pacific learners’ wellbeing in the educational sphere.

Implications for teaching practice and teacher training are acutely evident and need close attention. Findings reveal that fostering wellbeing in the classroom can be a complex, individual, and relational responsibility; however, unless teachers show an intentional commitment, interactive engagements can be overlooked and omitted from educational programs and curricula.

The Aotearoa New Zealand educational system has been slow in implementing a raft of requisite measures to counter anxiety and stress. Measures such as providing teacher professional support and guidance to understand Pacific ways of being and doing and considering how such practices can be embedded in their teaching pedagogy, are essential. Responding to Pacific students’ concerns necessitates that teachers mobilize, take responsibility, and become informed about the wide-ranging issues with which they are confronted.

Clearly, teachers and the education system at large need to review, reflect and revise practices. Practices were, at times, biased and ill-informed, lacking cultural and professional integrity. Such actions directly contravene established standards of teaching practice (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 3) and indicate a clear need to build stronger reciprocal relationships with Pacific students.

Importantly, the voices and perspectives of Pacific youth need to be foregrounded.

Pacific children and young people are opting for resistance as their form of resilience, in response to climate and biodiversity crises. Instead of focusing on the blinkered continuation of an outdated and deficient curriculum, teachers need to meet the moment of this convergence of crises by supporting children and young people as they seek hope through action and activism. Grief, worry and fear, rather than being downplayed, should be recognized as valid responses to the threats of climate emergency and biodiversity loss. Furthermore, many children and young people are also experiencing feelings of frustration, confusion, betrayal, and abandonment because of adult inaction towards climate change (Hickman et al., 2021). Urgent attention is requisite to allay this raft of anxiety.

Pacific youth lack adequate support in this time of climate crisis. They express sadness, frustration, anxiety and concerns over a metaphorical and literal tidal wave of destruction and devastation of their traditional homelands.

The catch cry across the Pacific from Pacific youth activists, “we’re not drowning; we are fighting”, gives hope to Pacific youth in Aotearoa and motivation that their contributions will assist in working together to stem the increasing tide of devastation. Ultimately, and of key concern, is the finding that mainstream schooling is not serving Pacific youth well. Teachers are paying little regard to Pacific values in their curriculum and planning, and insufficient heed is given to responding to climate change education and the wellbeing of Pacific youth.

9. Recommendations

Clearly, stronger pedagogical approaches and teaching strategies are required. In this section, I outline key recommendations that would enhance the practice of teachers of Pacific students. Teachers would benefit from foregrounding effective strategies to enhance Pacific student wellbeing and to seek out, understand and engage in Pacific cultural practices. For example, investigating values and cultural practices that embody natural phenomena, and that seek to nurture and protect the precious taonga (treasures), such as Te Wheke (Octopus), and the clean, pristine environment of the traditional homelands of Pacific students and their families, is imperative and will correspondingly build their skills and understandings.

A range of suggested strategies may encourage teachers to build their praxis and pedagogy in Pacific education and climate change. Encouraging teachers and teachers in training to undergo lived experience in Pacific nations may help to build a deeper understanding of cultural worldviews and ways of being and doing, and to discover traditional practices that can be incorporated into teaching practice. Furthermore, employing the services of Pacific mentors with expertise who can guide teachers to extend their cultural funds of knowledge and to examine their biases and the cultural capital that has perpetuated positions of privilege and advantage in society. Additionally, examining the curriculum, engaging in stronger critique, noting gaps, and building Pacific content across the curriculum, including climate change discourse, would assist teachers in their planning, and in reviewing their own gaps of knowledge in their teaching. Finally, conducting empathetic conversations around climate change with Pacific youth, whilst maintaining a critical stance when engaging with competing and conflicting discourses around climate change.

10. Conclusions

In conclusion, this study has highlighted the responses from Pacific youth to climate change in the Pacific and how the education system is ineffectual in addressing climate-related issues. Findings from Talanoa conducted with Pacific youth have revealed the considerable gaps that exist in teachers' knowledge, practice and skills in dealing with issues of climate change. Furthermore, the findings have revealed an inability to respond to the wellbeing of Pacific youth, who are acutely aware of the climate crises taking place across the Pacific and adversely affecting their traditional homelands. A call is therefore made for significant changes to occur within the education system, curriculum and teaching practice to address these gaps. For example, consideration should be given to Pacific culturally driven solutions, such as alternative Pacific pedagogy that harnesses Pacific frameworks such as Pacific Values and Te Wheke, accompanying a Talanoa methodology.

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Article

‘Do Not Go Through the System Passively’: Integrating Environmental Studies and Ethnic Studies Through a Social Justice Outdoor Education Program for High School Learners

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Abstract

This study examines a social-justice-focused environmental education program serving marginalized students through fostering engagement with local communities and natural environments. It presents a focused ethnographic case study of teachers of color who designed and implemented an ethnic studies and environmental education curriculum intended to address the educational alienation experienced by many students as well as the intersection of social justice and environmental stewardship. The study considers how teachers at two very different urban schools—one a continuation school, the other a traditional college preparatory high school—provided a venue for students to advocate on behalf of oppressed communities with which they identified. Researchers collected qualitative data from a variety of sources: field notes from participant observation of outdoor and classroom activities, document review of curriculum and student projects, focus group interviews with 86 students, and semi-structured individual interviews with teachers and alumni. Students in this innovative program did not fit the classic climate justice activist profile by engaging in climate marches, raising money for environmental organizations, or lobbying Congress for better environmental legislation. However, a key finding from the program and the teachers who lead it is to broaden our understanding of what it means to be a climate activist.

Keywords: youth climate activism; climate change education; coloniality; ethnic studies; environmental education; marginalized youth; climate justice

1. Introduction

With all the intersecting meta-crises we are living through today—from climate change to industrial pollution, from racial and economic injustice, from overexploited natural resources to withering democratic institutions—it is a particularly daunting time for educators tasked with guiding our next generation of students. Given the interconnected nature of these problems, most of our potential responses are resistant to simple solutions. How can teachers know where to begin to address these myriad issues in their classrooms? Furthermore, as indicated in this Special Issue’s call, many schools and education settings are themselves “implicated in broader colonial-capitalist, industrial, and militaristic systems”. Nonetheless, some teachers working within these education systems are committed to developing curricula that work to dismantle these systems student by student, through

empowerment and academic rigor, and an understanding of the interconnected nature of our various social, economic, and environmental injustices.

In this paper, we present a case study of teachers of color who designed and implemented an interdisciplinary curriculum combining ethnic studies and environmental education. They aimed to address the educational alienation experienced by many of their students, while also exploring the intersection of social justice and environmental stewardship. The study focuses on two contrasting school contexts—one a continuation high school with no Advanced Placement (AP) classes and a 60% graduation rate, and the other a traditional college preparatory high school with numerous AP classes and a 96% graduation rate. In both settings, teachers created opportunities for students to engage in advocacy on behalf of marginalized communities with whom they identified. This work addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining how educators can simultaneously support students' academic development and nurture their sense of identity, agency, and connection to place—both socially and ecologically. Ultimately, this research considers how integrating environmental and ethnic studies can serve as a foundation for meaningful, justice-oriented education, and asks the following: how might educators in other contexts adopt and adapt this approach?

Education for sustainability has been critiqued from many angles. Scholars have expressed concerns that too much attention is given to climate change at the expense of other, arguably equally or more pressing concerns (Jimenez & Kabachnik, 2023; K. Richardson et al., 2023). Some scholars have critiqued climate change education in which teachers focus more on delivering facts and recommending specific actions for students to pursue instead of empowering change-makers to plot their own course for advocacy (Jimenez et al., 2020; Jickling & Wals, 2008; Jimenez & Moorhead, 2021). Additionally, research has often focused more on privileged students in environmental education programs, whereas the experiences of marginalized youth of color have received less attention (Jimenez et al., 2020). Little research has examined what activism might look like for marginalized youth who have little bandwidth to devote to causes beyond maintaining their own dignity, and perhaps even survival, in an oppressive system. As such, this paper examines in depth a social-justice-focused environmental education program that serves marginalized students through fostering their engagement with their local community and natural environments. This case study demonstrates how one environmental education program challenged such exclusion through an interdisciplinary approach rooted in and undergirded by environmental and ethnic studies.

2. Literature Review

To begin, it is helpful to consider the broader framing of environmental education. For instance, the North American Association for Environmental Education defines environmental education as “a process that helps individuals, communities, and organizations learn more about the environment, and develop skills and understanding about how to address global challenges” (NAAEE, 2009). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) similarly defined environmental education but added that “environmental education does not advocate a particular viewpoint or course of action. Rather, environmental education teaches individuals how to weigh various sides of an issue through critical thinking and it enhances their own problem-solving and decision-making skills” (EPA, 2025).¹ Neither definition includes mention of encouraging students to experience the environment firsthand; yet, researchers have consistently shown that immersion in outdoor settings offers numerous benefits, from reducing stress to boosting emotional well-being (Mann et al., 2022).

Increasingly, educators and researchers recognize the need to connect environmental education with social justice and cultural relevance, especially for marginalized youth (Trott et al., 2023).² Researchers have long criticized environmental education for overlooking the students who might benefit most from outdoor environmental education (Norton & Watt, 2014). Historically, environmental education has inadequately incorporated both the perspectives and experiences of people of color both in outdoor spaces and in addressing broader social justice issues (Ruf, 2020). Outside of educational spaces, this phenomenon is mirrored in broader environmental movements as well (Jones, 2022). Speaking about climate activists, executive director of the U.S. Climate Action Network Keya Chatterjee stated:

“The climate movement being mostly white has been a hindrance in making progress. We cannot win in this way. [...] The need for racial and economic justice to be at the heart of our work has been obvious for communities of colour for a long time”. (Farand, 2020)

At the same time, ethnic studies—with its focus on the histories and experiences of marginalized groups—is being integrated into curricula to make learning more relevant and empowering for students (Lewis & James, 1995; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2019).³ As such, this literature review surveys research at the nexus of environmental education, ethnic studies integration, and climate justice pedagogy, focusing on curriculum development, student outcomes, and educator practices in both formal and informal settings.

Mainstream environmental education and the “green schools” movement have historically been grounded in White, middle-class perspectives, emphasizing conservation and stewardship while often ignoring systemic injustices (Taylor, 2014). Pellow (2020) has shown that this traditional lens can ignore the environmental knowledge and experiences of Indigenous, Black, and other communities of color. In contrast, a justice-oriented approach—often termed *environmental justice education* or *climate justice education*—situates ecological issues within social, racial, and economic contexts (Whyte, 2017).

Ethnic studies pedagogy offers an interdisciplinary lens that can enrich environmental and sustainability curricula and engage students (Sleeter, 2011). While both ethnic studies and environmental education in the U.S. may come under greater scrutiny with the Trump administration, states such as California continue to move forward with educational initiatives that unite the two based on their common goals of encouraging students to critically examine systems of power and oppression (A. Allen, 2024). Notably, California is implementing ethnic studies as a high school requirement and has added climate justice to its education code (California Department of Education, 2021, 2025).⁴

This provides evidence that when environmental curriculum is made culturally relevant, socially conscious, and interdisciplinary, it can be a significantly more effective environmental education program tailored for marginalized youth.

3. Conceptual Framework

One curricular movement that has been keen to speak to issues of racial and economic justice—and undergirds the research presented here—has been the burgeoning movement to include ethnic studies courses in middle and secondary school and led by teachers who want “to create a course that would speak to our younger selves, to the students we were in high school” (Beckham & Concordia, 2019, p. 1). Educators with San Francisco Unified Public Schools have been on the front lines in spearheading such a movement, often with a particular focus on encouraging students to explore their intersectional identities (Moorhead & Jimenez, 2021). Many of these educators viewed their own struggle to institutionalize an ethnic studies curriculum at their schools as continuing the work of the 1960s activists who created the first ethnic studies program at the tertiary level, specifically, the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University. Originally,

educators ran it as a pilot program for ninth grade students with “early warning indicators” (i.e., poor attendance, behavioral issues, and low course performance) (Dee & Penner, 2017). However, with evidence of causal linkages between ethnic studies enrollment and measurable student improvement in attendance, grade point average, progress towards graduation, and students’ math and science assessments (Dee & Penner, 2017), the San Francisco Board of Education eventually required at least one section be available at every high school in the district. Beginning with the class of 2028, San Francisco high school students will be required to complete at least two semesters of 10 credits of electives in ethnic studies (SFUSD, 2025). Further, starting with the class of 2030, California high school students will be required to pass an ethnic studies class to graduate (B. Allen, 2023). Other states across the U.S. are also moving to mandate ethnic studies in high school curriculum (Cabrera, 2019).

Within this tradition, several educators—Catherine, Conrad, and Ken, each working at a high school within the San Francisco public school system—created the Wilderness and Arts Literacy Collaborative (WALC) in 1999 for students of color and as an educational alternative to traditional classroom-based environmental education. Whereas ethnic studies courses in general do not explicitly address environmental issues and broader ecological understandings, WALC emphasized the infusion of social justice perspectives into its environmental education goals, with particular attention to the local context and experiences of its community members. According to the WALC founders, the program originated in racial conflict. Conrad, for instance, noticed that conflicts between students of different ethnic and racial groups had surfaced (reflective of issues taking place in the surrounding community), and he and Ken started a “Unity club” for students to come together to have fun and make friends. But, as Catherine explained, “because Conrad is Conrad, the way he did that was to take them outside”, which became the spark for the WALC program. Now in its 25th year and having touched the lives of hundreds of young people, WALC offers educators elsewhere a model for developing environmental education programs at the intersection of social justice and environmental stewardship through the integration of environmental studies and ethnic studies.

4. Methods

We employed a focused ethnographic case study to explore WALC as a novel environmental education program in a cultural setting (i.e., school environments, field and camping trips) during a limited period (i.e., January to December 2024) (Hammersley, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Data came from a variety of sources: field notes from participant observation of outdoor and classroom activities, document review of curriculum and student projects, focus group interviews with students, and semi-structured individual interviews with teachers and alumni.

4.1. Program Description

WALC is a project-based academic program designed for students in their last two years of high school. The program serves primarily lower-income youth of color who have historically been underserved, with many at risk of academic underachievement or dropping out of high school. It embraces the view, supported by research, that taking students outdoors can improve students’ well-being and aid in the process of students learning to better respect and understand each other (Mann et al., 2022; Norton & Watt, 2014; Castonguay & Jutras, 2009). The teachers designed WALC to address students’ academic needs (e.g., credit for graduation, coursework for college preparation), as well as facilitate students’ sense of self and sense of place as participants in both their local community and greater society, and in the ecological processes of an increasingly endangered planet.

Foundational to WALC is the integration of environmental studies and ethnic studies for an interdisciplinary educational experience. WALC relies on environmental themes such as biodiversity, interdependence, flux equilibrium, and sustainability to integrate science, history, literature, writing, art, and math within rigorous and relevant curricula that centers the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color. While WALC occurs both in and outside the classroom, with students regularly exploring natural environments, including forests, grasslands, mountains, deserts, rivers, marshes and wetlands, volcanoes, and lakes, they also visit national and city parks and participate in native habitat restoration. Through extensive outdoor activities, WALC encourages students to examine how they might apply lessons learned about nature to themselves and their communities (WALC, 2025).

4.2. School Context

WALC operates at two public high schools in San Francisco. One is a project-based continuation school with close to 150 students, offering an alternative diploma program for students who are behind in credits or at risk of dropping out of traditional public school, or in some cases have already done so. The other is a traditional college preparatory school with approximately 1300 students. Both schools are organized into learning communities, or pathway programs, that begin in the junior year. WALC is one of the two-year pathways (at the continuation school, other pathways include acting, fashion, and music; at the preparatory high school, other pathways include creative arts, game design, law, and leadership).

At the continuation school, students participated in WALC Monday through Friday for the entire school day with the program integrating science, English, history, art, and math. On Wednesday, students enrolled in WALC typically volunteered at a nearby park or reserve to help with litter clean-up or restoration work. On Fridays, they participated in daylong field trips throughout the Bay Area. They also participated in two overnight camping trips (three to four days in length). At the preparatory high school, students participated in WALC two to three days a week and attended three integrated classes in science, social studies, and English (i.e., astronomy, U.S. history, and American literature for juniors and environmental science, American democracy and economics, and English/European literature for seniors). Because of the more structured school day and the need to attend classes outside of WALC, these students participated in two daylong field trips and two overnight camping trips (again, two to three days in length and inclusive of weekends).

Two of the founding WALC teachers Conrad and Ken, each with more than 20 years of teaching experience, lead their program at the preparatory high school. Catherine expanded WALC to her continuation school a year later; this school also employs a second teacher to co-lead their program, Rachele, with 11 years of experience in the program and 15 years of experience in special education. The preparatory high school employs an additional teacher with 9 years of experience with the program and working as an Earth science teacher. All teachers are salaried employees with the school district and are not paid for their time outside the classroom with students (i.e., camping trips, field trips that extend past the school day). The WALC teachers fundraise for each school year to cover a range of costs, including food and camping supplies, cameras, and incidentals (e.g., maintenance of vans, tents, and sleeping bags). Additional educators at each school volunteer as chaperones on camping and field trips.

At the continuation high school, close to 78% of the student body was classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and 21% were English learners. Sixty percent of students identified as Hispanic/Latino, 30% as African American, 7% as two or more races (other categories were below 4%). At the preparatory high school, nearly 64% of the student

body was classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and 21% were English learners. Forty-four percent of students identified as Asian American, followed by 30% identifying as Hispanic/Latino, 8% as Filipino, 5% as African American, 4% as White, and 3% as Pacific Islander (other categories were below 3%). At both schools, most students signed up to participate in WALC; however, some students were placed in the program by the school.

4.3. Participants

Seven educators (two from the continuation high school and five from the preparatory high school) agreed to participate in this study through observations and/or interviews; however, as our data collection is not yet complete at the preparatory school (which will form the basis for other articles), this article will focus on the two primary teachers at the continuation school (Catherine and Rachelle). In total, 86 students (32 students from the continuation high school and 54 from the preparatory high school) also participated through observations, focus groups and/or informal interviews. Some of these interviews took place during field trips and others took place within the classroom. Nine alumni (four from the continuation high school and five from the preparatory high school) agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews.

4.4. Qualitative Data Collection

Interaction with the two founding WALC teachers began in January 2024 after researchers received IRB approval. Data collection commenced in February 2024 with observation of participants during a field trip and continued through December 2024 with focus group interviews with students, interviews with alumni and two additional teachers integral to the program, and observations of student coursework.

All participants could opt in or out of any part of the research and at any point, and no participant was compensated for participating in the study. Student participation rates for data collection efforts ranged from 80% to 100%, with all students allowing researchers to observe and take notes of their WALC activities and 80% of students participating in focus groups. Students, based on age (i.e., 18 or over or not), signed either assent or consent forms.

4.5. Types of Data Collection (Observations, Focus Groups, Interviews, and Student Work)

Observations. In total, researchers observed approximately 155 h of instruction with students over the course of 15 research trips. Both researchers took observation notes on paper, including what was seen and heard, as well as methodological notes, theoretical notes, and personal notes (Dennis, 2010; Jackson, 1990; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2010).

Focus groups. Researchers conducted two rounds of in-person focus groups with students in a classroom at their school or at a field trip site. Researchers employed the same interview protocol in each focus group. Generally, the protocol included “how” and “what” types of questions to elicit students’ thoughts, perspectives, and opinions about their experience in WALC (Hammersley, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Each focus group lasted between 10 to 40 min and was recorded and transcribed by a researcher.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews. Researchers conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with teachers and alumni. Interviews were conducted either in-person or via Zoom. Interviews lasted for one hour and were recorded and transcribed by a researcher. Researchers used the same interview protocol for each interview. Teachers were asked about their motivations, goals, and approaches for environmental and social justice education, and alumni were asked about their thoughts, perspectives, and opinions about their experience in WALC post completion of the program. *Informal interviews.* Throughout the fieldwork, researchers relied on informal interviews with participants to discuss concepts and questions that surfaced during observations and notetaking (Onwuegbuzie et al.,

2010; Ortlipp, 2008; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). They worked to avoid projecting their ideas onto the participants and allowed participants to discuss their own perceptions of WALC (Wolcott, 2009).

Student work. Throughout, researchers analyzed field worksheets developed by teachers and completed by students at both schools. At the continuation school, we observed students' final presentations and read their final project, one semester a spiral-bound book of poetry and art (watercolor paintings overlaid with black-ink line drawings) and another semester a photo gallery (images of animals in their natural settings and images of animals overlaid with computer-generated graphics).

4.6. Qualitative Data Analysis

Researchers relied on grounded theory beginning with open coding (Creswell & Poth, 2017) in which each researcher individually applied emergent codes derived from interview and focus group transcripts. After two individual passes of each transcript, researchers collectively identified themes and developed codes for shared features of the lived experience of WALC. As themes emerged, researchers systematically coded data into "clusters of meaning" that represented the phenomenon of interest (e.g., social justice elements, intersection of environmental studies and ethnic studies). Researchers then moved into a second phase of coding (i.e., axial coding) to develop subcategories that contributed to explanations. In the final phase of coding (i.e., selective coding), researchers developed a stronger theoretical understanding of emergent themes.

Throughout, researchers used methodological note-taking to identify themes and patterns in the data (e.g., observations, student work, transcripts), which were then triangulated to enhance validity (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Wolcott, 2009). Researchers considered their methodological notes alongside theoretical notes as a way to develop hypotheses and ideas that arose during data collection (L. Richardson & Adams-St Pierre, 2005; Sangasubana, 2011). Researchers worked to mitigate bias through the use of an interview protocol, member checking, and data saturation (Dibley, 2011).

For member checking, researchers shared their findings with study participants (i.e., teachers) to allow them to ensure that it aligned with their experiences (Candela, 2019). Additionally, the researchers (a Professor of Foundations and Social Advocacy who previously taught high school social studies in three different countries and a former journalist now working as an academic researcher and educator) met multiple times to reflect on the analysis. In these conversations, the authors recognized and discussed how their backgrounds and experiences facilitated their ability to be reflexive in the examination of the data.

5. Findings

Given that data collection is complete at one school yet incomplete at the second, and that the continuation high school had a final project specific to "climate justice" (the theme of this Special Issue), this paper focuses on the experiences of students and teachers at the continuation school. However, given that the WALC program at the continuation school was built upon an initial program designed by Conrad and Ken in the preparatory school, we also briefly discuss their influence in the development of the WALC program, with the aim to elaborate further on how a program like WALC can exist in a preparatory school setting in future papers. These findings prioritize letting our participants speak for themselves through direct quotations from interviews, as well as observation and field notes coinciding with their written projects and verbal presentations. The following begins with findings in relation to the participating teachers and then, more generally, in relation to educational outcomes. It ends with findings stemming from students and their experiences of WALC.

5.1. From Ethnic Studies to Environmental Education

While in college, the two WALC founders Catherine and Conrad pieced together a program of ethnic studies coursework for themselves, as Catherine explained, “before there were any ES [ethnic studies] classes”. However, they realized that they needed to learn more about the subjects they would be teaching (biology, ecology, etc.) because they wanted their science instruction to be “substantive and rigorous”, in order to “serve students better”. Thus, they focused their professional development on acquiring this pedagogical content knowledge.

When the WALC founders started learning about environmental education, they were “accustomed to being the only teachers of color in the room” and noticed that “most [education] trips were either experiential learning [such as how to set up camp, do ropes courses, etc.] or mostly classroom-based learning with one or two field trips”. Catherine said, “slowly people are starting to think about serving a more diverse student clientele and bringing up words like ‘cultural competency’ and now ‘DEI’”. However, she commented that in the “diversity equity inclusion context”, the standard model has been to add social justice training components to science teachers (and those teaching them). Her own experience as a workshop leader flipped this approach:

A lot of the time, when we share our model, people don’t always like to hear what we have to say. When we’re telling them: ‘You need to diversify your organization’, and they’re like, ‘Oh, that’s so hard’. I have no idea how many times I’ve heard park rangers tell us all the reasons why people of color don’t want to become park rangers. We tell them they have to go and read books and take ethnic studies classes. The way I learned science is how they have to go learn the background and contributions of people of color they report to want to include.

So the training we did for teachers, instead of trying to recruit among science people, we recruited ethnic studies educators who wanted to take their kids outside, teachers who would say things like, ‘Hey, how do I take these students outside to teach them about the environment and make it matter?’ [...] They were totally on board with doing that, as opposed to when we get environmental people, and we’re saying, ‘Hey, you have to learn about people of color in our history and social justice’. There’s a lot of resistance, with them saying things like ‘that’s not what we do’.

5.2. Teachers as Activists

A fundamental theme to emerge was how teacher participants perceived their work. Notably, they saw their role as social activists in educational settings. In this way, we’re studying their actions through the lens of Universal Design (Hall et al., 2019). That is, we consider the teachers’ end goal—having students learn to advocate for themselves and others—and then explore how they worked to achieve it.

Rachelle, for instance, considered her job a form of activism and said activism “looks a lot different to everybody”. She doesn’t believe that her students

have to go be a leader, like, sign these petitions, donate, join marches—those sorts of things [...] Capitalism sucks, and they’ll probably follow what they need to follow for the sake of earning [a] livelihood. There’s a lot of small things we teach them environmentally, and I do know a lot of them make conscious choices. Students will say things like, ‘I now know a lot about the beef industry in central South America’, so they’ll make a conscious effort to eat less fast food. They’re

trying their best. But I hope they have the knowledge they can say something [to] speak up when something is happening.

Similarly, Catherine explained,

Almost every one of our students lives in poverty; many of them are first-generation high school graduates. Very few of our students go on to graduate college [. . .] If they continue to advocate for the environment for the rest of their lives, that's fantastic. But if they conclude they're a capable change-maker, but the issue they choose is public housing or minimum wage, that's great. One of our mottos is, Do not go through the system passively. If you use these tools to impact your own personal life, then we're proud of you.

She also added how she sees success in more ways than just producing environmental activists:

Some of our students who keep in touch with us—some of them have totally gone on an entirely environmental route [. . .] majored in environmental studies, even master's degrees—come back talking about environmental ethics, like recycling, composting, being conscientious about energy or plastic consumption [...] A lot of those things stick with them, and we're happy about that. But it's not as if I'd be unsatisfied if they went into the world and made their lives better and it wasn't related to the environment [. . .] I don't have any illusion that having one semester with us is going to turn them into radical environmentalists, but I do think that hopefully the idea that nature is important and something to take care of and that it matters to Indigenous peoples and communities of color [. . .] that there are parallels to making changes in the natural world as in your communities, and that these are things they'll care about and vote about.

5.3. *Learning Outdoors*

This brings us to another key theme, namely, the importance of bringing students to outdoor settings as a way of making them more effective learners as well as advocates and perhaps environmental stewards. As Catherine explained,

Our urban kids of color have lost a connection to the outdoors. Even though we're surrounded by national parks and the most beautiful natural places, our kids have never been to most of those places. We take many kids across the Golden Gate Bridge for the first time, even though they were born and raised in the city—they've never even been to the North Bay.

Rachelle likewise agreed, adding,

Our students are not very strong writers—a lot of them are writing way below grade level. We tell them you're going to write every single day [. . .] but when they're outdoors, their writing is better, and deeper, when they're doing it sitting by a forest creek [rather than] in a classroom. They're more willing to dig a little deeper, more willing to share because of what we know nature does for people. It also takes all of those distractions from the schoolhouse and the distractions and stressors they deal with everyday [in the city]. My favorite thing is watching these tough 6-foot boys play tag with each other; they're still kids, which is great for us to see as teachers but also reminds them of what it was like to feel wondrous. Those sort of things that get batted out of everybody.

Rachelle also discussed how teaching in outdoor settings keeps them “growing as an educator” because when teaching outdoors, “you never know how a kid is going to react when we're out there—we can't just send them to the office”. Further, just as natural settings are always changing, teaching outdoors prevents one from “teaching the same thing a few years from now”.

Catherine explained that after 25 years of teaching, she “cannot imagine being in [a] classroom every single day, not doing something hands on in the real world, which also offers us as teachers a lot of opportunities to do things that we love”.

Of course, the WALC teachers did not visit sites as neutral grounds to experience the outdoors. Rather, they saw them as place-based education sites and as a pivotal part of inculcating a love of place, which in turn could make students more inclined to fight for saving it. As Rachelle said,

We use environmental studies as a lens to study our community, our history, ourselves. [...]. This program was created by teachers of color for students of color as a more effective way to engage them in their education. Central to WALC is that environmental themes and social justice themes are highly integrated [...] just as geology explains the way the land was formed and shaped—similarly, ethnic studies tells you how our country was formed and shaped—those parallels are really central to why we started WALC.

5.4. *Fostering Empathy*

Catherine explained how one semester she worked to first give students exposure to other species in their native habitat by observing and photographing them, with high-quality cameras provided to students by WALC during school days. Students then considered how the features of the species they studied were adaptive to their environment and speculated how their ecosystem was impacted by changes to their habitat. She maintained that students are much more likely to find learning about other species more interesting if they have this embedded experience at the start of their semester curriculum. This motivation, she added, could move them to care more about these species and perhaps even advocate for their welfare. She called the model a ‘solutionary’ one⁵, arguing that in order to convince people to advocate for change, it is important to first develop a love for a place and its species. As she elaborated,

Students love animals, and they want to care about animals. So we teach about wildlife and talk about what climate change is doing to animals, and then incorporate climate justice action [...] These are definitely values and strategies and tools that I hope they carry with them throughout their lives.

Catherine says that to encourage action, it is essential to first ‘create empathy’. To this end, a final project required students to write about how climate change was impacting a particular species and a parallel community (such as sea lions and farm workers) and to advocate for a response that can help both communities. Rachelle added,

Having fun on our trips is part of it, but we emphasize to students they’re here to learn something, and you deserve to learn something about where you are, your history, and we can use the outdoors as a model for what that is. Thus, outdoor settings also provide a better opportunity not only for forming relationships to the land they visit, but also amongst themselves and the greater community.

Continuing to elaborate on forging relationships, Rachelle discussed how such trips enabled students to “bond with each other, the kind of collegiality you wouldn’t get just sitting next to each other in the classroom”. Given that many people of color report feeling excluded from spending their leisure time in the outdoors (Lee, 2025), she found it noteworthy that some alumni expressed how the program helped them feel more welcome, and thus seek experiences outdoors. She spoke of a former student who

just came back with his 2-year-old daughter. [He said they] went to Disneyland but on the way [...] decided to camp instead of staying in hotels. He was such a city kid, but he said he learned some things from [us].

But Rachelle emphasized there are also students who will say “that was fun, but I’ll never do that again—I’m a city kid through and through”. She said she was fine with this because “at least they’ve had the option to make that choice for themselves as opposed to those spaces telling them that they can’t”.

Catherine further emphasized the importance of outdoor settings by discussing how and when students changed. She said, it is

a very motivating process that you can see, even if they only just appreciate going outside. [...] Things like that sustain our drive, keep us motivated to keep trying. Whatever extent we can offer students a lens or experiences or insights into environmental and social issues they wouldn’t have had otherwise, it’s motivating for them and for us.

Still, CS cautioned against a familiar mantra in education that one has to build relationships with students before you can teach them. She explained that relationships with students “need to be built on what you have to offer them”. For instance, in speaking about the benefits of outdoor learning, she said,

When we take them outside and help them to figure out some natural processes, it then creates a framework which gives them an edge in the classroom, whether it’s motivational—‘ooh, I’ve already learned about this’ or ‘I’m going to get to see this’. Or when we go out, we do inquiries all the time, inquiries are really good for making students feel academically proficient—when they figure something out, even if they’re wrong, hypothesizing and gathering evidence, they feel academically competent by figuring out that they’re wrong or figuring out something [...] a light goes on.

This last point speaks to another key theme: the importance of academic rigor and the need to combat low expectations while cultivating relationships, especially given how research has documented the detrimental impacts that low expectations have had on many students of color (Cherng, 2017) As Catherine said,

Our students come to us very disenfranchised from their education, often with a tremendous history of failure [...] and a sense of disempowerment. It’s kind of our mission to make more empowered people who feel like they can go into the world to make changes. The way in which we think that they’re capable means something to them, because they haven’t necessarily gotten that before [...] we say ‘we respect you as students [so] we are going to have high expectations of you. We establish it as a foundation that we do not think they are not intelligent.

The rigor is deliberate, but it is also about social justice, because our students are plagued with low expectations and that’s born of systemic racism, and it’s a huge disservice to our kids. So we’re intentional in saying to kids you might work harder than you have before, but hopefully you’ll learn more and gain more skills than you have before. We’re all going to struggle through this, though they can support each other in the lessons [...] all these pieces enable us to do the rigor.

Applying such rigor, of course, required dedicated and experienced professionals. Catherine reminded us that “the rigor has to be scaffolded” because roughly a third of her students had learning disabilities.

5.5. Flexible School Structures

The teachers credited the unique structure and settings of the schools, in part, with allowing WALC’s success. Catherine said that while she initially thought “ethnic studies was going to change the world”, she later realized that “the structure of the student’s education needs to be different to have more impact”. Specifically, she said, “the traditional

structure of six-classes-in-a-building-in-a-day doesn't work for disenfranchised students". She added, students

do projects that try to make an impact. Some of our measures, if we're effective, are 'do the students come to school, do they complete the projects, do they get to exhibition?' [...] We create curricula that is relevant to them, exposing them to the natural world and taking them to places they've never been [...] We do see them engage in more rigorous things than they may have ever engaged in before [...] because [our students] have a history of not being successful at comprehensive high schools.

Notably, these measures of success have been shared by other researchers who have studied the efficacy of ethnic studies programs (Beckham & Concordia, 2019). From our own focus groups with current students, we also noticed the 'rigor' of the program was one of their biggest complaints, even though all the students we spoke with had an overall positive appraisal of the program and several mentioned their pride in "making it through" WALC.

Rachelle also agreed that "there's enough data to show us the traditional model doesn't work for everyone". As she explained, "You lose your imagination because you're asked to do something a certain way, so the flexibility of our program allows them to think deeper and connect with themselves".

However, even the preparatory high school in this study had the flexibility and freedom allowed by small learning communities, or pathways, designed to encourage students to join cohorts of classmates to focus on a topic from a particular lens. While these students' experience was closer to the six-classes-in-a-building-each-day scenario, they still ventured out of the classroom on two day-long Friday field trips and on a multi-day camping trip each semester (a more in-depth discussion of this school and its teachers will be the focus of a future paper).

5.6. Students' Embrace of WALC

Nearly all of the students in individual interviews and focus groups expressed gratitude for the program and, in particular, the opportunity to learn outdoors. They consistently mentioned how WALC changed both their current lives and what they perceived as their future life trajectories. One student explained that their WALC trip to Yosemite was the first time they ever "got to go sledding". Other students talked about how a trip changed their relationship to outdoor settings, with one student saying, "I find myself going on walks more in the environment, like around lakes". Several other students spoke of how they would like to take their families and future children to the spaces they first visited through WALC.

These students in focus groups often contrasted these benefits with their previous negative schooling experiences. They talked about how "we all went to regular schools, so we know what that's like", with several adding that their previous schooling was "kind of torture, stuck in a class all day". They were grateful that "we went from that to going on trips". Other students noted their transition from students who had "severe junior-itis" and who "were skipping class, ditching school, and not caring" about their grades and "only wanting to hang out with friends" to being more conscientious about the world in general and their academic engagement in particular. As one student said,

Before joining WALC I was definitely one of these kids being bad as hell, doing whatever I want. Now I definitely want to learn. It is actually very fun—my teachers made it in a way that's super interesting and also makes us connect it to ourselves. That's the thing that made me more interested in environmental issues.

5.7. Students' Moving Beyond Climate Change (Focus Groups)

In terms of key takeaways from WALC, students in focus groups reported learning about ecology in a way that went beyond the climate change myopia found in many sustainability education programs (Jimenez & Kabachnik, 2023). As one student explained in a manner that recognized the interconnectedness of the world, “if a certain species goes extinct, whole ecosystems can crumble”. In their own way, students often acknowledged the problems of human supremacy, whether it be “how humans are causing animals to go extinct” as well as how policymaking should consider the impacts on “all of the animals that are on this Earth” rather than just “the safety of the environment, of me”. Another student spoke about how “everything has a role—this is happening because this is eating this or sleeping on that—so WALC has helped me to become more open-minded. I now think of seeing how every piece fits in the puzzle”.

Other focus group students discussed how the program helped them recognize the nuanced ways that humans interact with their environments. For instance, one student spoke of how they “came into the program thinking dams were good [but] now think they’re not so good”, a contrast to those who uncritically praise hydropower as ‘green energy’. By focusing on climate change alone, one might be inclined to welcome dams as “alternative”, “green”, “renewable” energy sources to mitigate climate change. However, the broader understanding of ecology and habitat destruction that the WALC teachers shared with the students moved beyond carbon emissions to inculcate a greater appreciation for the community of life that a dam devastates (Jensen et al., 2021; Siebert & Rees, 2021). Some students mentioned the lack of wildlife they noticed by the reservoir. Other students noted parallels between how dams harmed communities of life to other barricades and walls that cause harm. For instance, one student in a poem compared cement “to the towering wall at the border” that separates families.

More generally, these students came to recognize the role of humans and their societal structures in shaping the natural environment. One student said that “since WALC I’ve been so involved with following all of the animals that have gone extinct because humans want to sell their parts to the black market to make money”. Another student said, “the good thing about human presence is removing invasives, but the bad thing is all the industrial development”, which causes marshes to disappear, which are needed to “filter out all those pollutants”. Another student noted that “we [humans] have become a problem all together”, arguing that one of the worst things about our society is all of the “new inventions” that cause more “pollution”—a rare indictment of the usually unquestioned myth of progress accompanying our industrial civilization.

A few students also pointed out how many Indigenous people live differently than most humans today. As one student noted, “it’s already embedded in their culture to know everything about how to take care of the Earth and be respectful”. Another student brought up how many Indigenous people “definitely have experience that we don’t have” because they “get their information from their older ones and that’s how they authenticate what they know”.

Other students, however, spoke more about the social justice aspects of WALC. One student recalled a memorable class activity in which he and his cohort walked around national parks to see which ethnicity (“African-American, Asian, Middle Eastern”, etc.) had more access to nature. They carried clickers to “identify people and tallied visitors they came across”, noticing there were “way more white people”, despite adjacent Oakland being notably more diverse. Such activities have been designed to help students appreciate the intersectionality of ethnic studies and environmental engagement (Pellow, 2020; de los Ríos, 2019; Sze, 2015).

Students also spoke generally about how environmental justice had become a priority for them through their experiences with WALC. As one student explained, now it is “something I’ve been super strong about”. A few students elaborated more deeply about the program’s impacts, particularly regarding the ecological restoration trips. One such student discussed a new housing project at Hunters Point, a former U.S. Navy shipyard turned Superfund site near Candlestick Point (SF.gov, 2025). As the student explained, “It’s not a totally safe environment for people, with cases of people getting certain illnesses, heart disease, lung diseases due to chemicals in the oil”. The student interrupted himself, saying, “we’re killing ourselves at this point; I could go on for hours about it”.

These student reflections also coincided with their agreement that the program was among the most rigorous they had experienced as students, requiring them “to read a whole book”, to “write everyday”, and to know “there’s not a day we don’t have assignments”. While most students signed up for the WALC, drawn to the environmental focus and daylong field trips, not all did. Several students said they joined the program because “WALC gives the most [academic] credit” and “its 55 credits are way more than other programs”; others said they were “placed” in the program. Additionally, not all WALC students entered the program environmentally inclined. Several mentioned “bugs”, “extreme cold”, and “long road trips”. Despite these challenges, the overall recollection of their trips was overwhelmingly positive.

5.8. Final Projects

Both of the final, semester-long projects (Spring and Fall 2024) at the continuation high school were rooted in an ‘empathy to action’ model. The concluding project for the Spring 2024 semester asked students to first reflect on how the program “asked you to express the interconnections between your people and the watershed, the interconnections between the people of Palestine and the watershed, and the interconnections between the colonized people throughout history”. Students were also asked to answer the essential question they had been studying: “How do the interconnections between people and the land influence the functioning of a watershed?”

Given this prompt, some students’ final presentations focused on a detailed description of one of the field sites they visited during their past semester and how members of that ecosystem depended on it. Examples included watercolor paintings and or poems about a local creek, a redwood forest, the Smith River, the Pescadero Marsh, the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir at Yosemite, and Klamath River. A few others chose to compare their families to natural environments. For instance, one student compared the disruptions caused by a death in their family to the death and disruption that dams unleash on their local ecosystems by bottling up the flow of life. The student wrote,

Yosemite, grand and beautiful—a luxury I’ve only experienced twice [...] my family like the raging currents of the waterfall, loud, chaotic, but always moving forward [...] a dam stops the flow in the water [...] death in the family, a barricade you can never quite see the top of, making you feel trapped unable to move forward. My family’s current now halted, trying to relearn our flow. We’ll get there eventually. Dams can always be demolished. We will be restored.

However, other students answered the call of this final assignment to advocate on behalf of an oppressed marginalized group, and many students effectively drew parallels between devastation of an ethnic community to devastation towards wildlife. One student highlighted their Yemeni heritage by comparing the flow of a creek visited in California to their hometown, or *wadi*, which “will always remain as humble as the Yemenis”. Another student discussed that just as marshes provide protection for wildlife, so should we protect Black people from police brutality. One of the most common themes was the contemporary Israeli assault on Palestinians living in Gaza, a focus the WALC teachers leaned into

because, as CS put it, “this was a really hard year, because we’re teaching about a genocide we’re all watching”. In this vein, one student wrote that “The water of the marsh moves freely, unlike Palestinians separated, controlled”. Another student drew parallels between Palestinians and the “beautiful Tolowa tribe” (whose ancestral lands were located in Northwestern California):

Pain of the Tolowa also felt by the Palestinians. Buildings demolished, shattered into thousands of pieces, water polluted, resources gone [...] set them free, let them flow and walk the lands that belong to them”.

Similarly, another student compared the experience of the Indigenous Yurok of California to the Palestinians:

Yurok and Palestinians interconnect, supporting each other, two tributaries joining to create a stronger river, finding their way to a common destination: peace and land back.

In focus groups, some students brought up what they learned from their final project:

If you really think about it, if you’ve been colonized, you are sort of interconnected with all these ways of resistance. That’s why we need to show solidarity with each other; [Palestine] Cambodians are also connected to the olive tree because they’ve had their forests cut down by colonist countries, and forced to move out of their homes and then had nowhere to go. (Cambodian-American student)

I chose to include a flower, which represents resilience, triumph over tribulations with Japanese occupation, brutal wars, war brides [...] similar to how Israel is trying to occupy Palestinian land.

I chose the olive tree because it is a very persistent tree—it likes to grow through drought, bad conditions like unhealthy or dying soil, even when it’s not getting what it needs, it still grows [...] like Palestinians persisting through apartheid and genocide. (Korean-American student)

The final “empathy to action” project for Fall 2024 concerned climate justice. Specifically, students were tasked with photographing wildlife they encountered on field trips and then discussing how some of these species have been or will be impacted by climate crisis, followed up by what actions could be taken today to mitigate these harms. Many of the students, in their verbal presentations, expressed succinctly and accurately their understanding of climate change and how it impacts the very species they observed on their nature trips. For instance, one student explained that snowy egrets that

hunt in wetland environments are at risk of destruction as the tides rise through the years. The release of greenhouse gasses causes climate change by trapping the sun’s heat. This causes global warming, which is also melting glaciers in the poles, causing a chain reaction which leads to sea level rising. This is not good for a wetland environment. Rising sea level can destroy the wetlands because of flooding and increased salinity. When the wetlands get flooded, the salt in the ocean’s water intrudes into the soil causing the plants to dry up and the wetland to die. This leaves the egret without shelter or sustenance.

Such an articulation is particularly impressive for a high school student given how many college students have a notably more limited understanding of climate change (Kistner & Jiménez, 2023; Leiserowitz et al., 2011; Hiser & Lynch, 2021). Students were also encouraged to consider how to address the hardships currently experienced by climate change’s many victims, as a student said,

To help farmers and any other manual workers [in extreme heat wave conditions], I think it’s important that we provide health insurance, increase break time and

provide enough shade, water and snacks. Climate justice means we have to give struggling groups what they need to live. The standard of what we give right now will not be enough as the temperature rises.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of their final assignment was to write “speculative journals” where students would both document current observed impacts as well as imagined or hypothesized future impacts as well. (This assignment was tied to the students reading Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*, speculative fiction set in the 2020s and 2030s about the effects of climate change and social inequality.) In their writing, students were encouraged to consider how climate change can impact humans and non-humans alike. One student compared how sea level rise “destroys the habitats that pelicans live in like marshlands, estuaries and coastal areas” but how this same sea level rise could impact residents living near “the toxic navy shipyard”. Another student discussed how he “wanted to focus on rising temperature and its injustice and harm to farm workers and animals like the grey fox”. He went on to discuss how “grey foxes are at risk of losing more of their habitat when our global temperature rises, their home at risk of drying up and becoming fuel for wildfires” while farm workers, in order “to keep their jobs and feed their families”, have to endure “excessive amounts of physical labor [that] can be extra cruel in the heat, causing medical emergencies like heat exhaustion or heat stroke which, long term, can lead to brain injuries or even death”.

Another student compared climate change impacts on both sea life and the people who depend on them for their livelihood. The student followed up with how we should respond to ameliorate these issues, saying that those fishing for their livelihood now find it “almost impossible” to feed their families:

there is not as much habitat available for [fish]. The rising sea temperatures also affect certain animals’ reproduction systems that the fish depend on for their own food [. . .] I very rarely see any fishermen here in Elkhorn slough any more [. . .] the rising temperature can also cause an increase in the sea urchin population that keeps the kelp from growing since the sea urchins eat kelp. Kelp forests help mitigate the impacts of climate change by absorbing carbon dioxide, so if the sea urchins keep consuming the kelp, important fish habitat will be lost, and carbon will be released into the water [. . .] A way we can achieve climate justice for the fishermen and help the sea otters is restoring kelp forests. More kelp forests would make more habitat available for fish and sea otters.

Teachers at the continuation school included a unit in which students studied the evolutionary trees of bears and then contemplated future evolutionary trees for species alive today. Students speculated how some characteristics of species were responses to their local environmental conditions. Teaching students about species’ evolutionary trees is, in part, an exercise in fostering students’ empathic capacity, so students can appreciate the long way all current species have come to still exist today. In our observations, many students enjoyed the exercise of understanding species evolution. One student, for example, during a class discussion enthusiastically described how a chicken and a T-Rex “look nothing alike but chickens are one of the most closely related species on the planet to a T-Rex”, as he went on to describe their similarities. Apropos to these lessons, students were asked to speculate how animals alive today might adapt to a climate changing future. For example, a student used his speculative journal to “showcase how climate change can alter the elk’s evolution” in the future, sharing:

These elk have gotten smaller over the years along with their antlers [. . .] I believe this is a result of the dry grass not providing enough to keep up the previous

mass of the antlers. They've had a lack of thick, rich, green, nutrient-filled grasses for around 35 years because of the rising heats and common wildfires.

Similarly, another student discussed how sea otters were

on the brink of extinction and ocean acidification is just making this way worse for them. Acidic waters are causing shell thinning and reducing the survival rate of shellfish larvae, which is affecting the food supply for sea otters. They are one of the top-end predators at shore but have recently been seen eating plants like kelp and seagrass, which is something most people don't know. This got me thinking maybe there was a possibility for some sea otters in the future to evolve [as] omnivores, diverging from those that stay carnivores but find a different type of food source.

Such speculative journals can be also viewed as a form of hope through the lens of what some scholars have referred to as "deep time" (McPhee, 1998). That is, rather than just lamentably focus on all the species that are going extinct, this exercise helps students imagine a future for resilient survivors. In his speculative journal, a student expressed hope for how indigenous communities might respond to a climate-changing future: "the native people of Monterey Bay, who are the Esselen tribe, and the sea lions are disproportionately affected by the warming ocean temperatures causing their food sources to deplete, so the native people came together to be heard and get justice for them and the sea lions". However, she followed up with a more neutral description of how sea lions might evolve and "become the ancestor to a new species", writing that

These animals [in the future] are no longer social. Now they just watch out for themselves and their young. Their flippers have become longer, and their bodies are thinner; they no longer pull themselves through the water but shoot through the water like an arrow instead, helping them to catch faster fish. The sea lions have also developed sharper teeth; they are razor sharp and 3–4 inches long. Together with their new body shape, these teeth allow them to catch faster aquatic animals like small sharks.

Another student described in considerable detail the deadly impacts of toxic algal blooms on sea lions, and how even after they flee the extreme heat of the warming seas they "can't enjoy themselves while resting" in the extreme heat on land. But in his speculative journal he wrote,

even though things are bad for the sea lions, I predict how they could have behavioral adaptations in their changing environment. One thing I found fascinating was that they adapted due to the lack of their prey and switched from salmon, mackerel, sardines and anchovies to prey like squid that is better suited to rising temperatures. They have found a substitute for their sustenance. Even if it becomes hard for sea lions to survive, they are very resilient animals capable of adapting to the rapid change of environment.

This exercise fostered students' hope of a continued future of the community of life that was not necessarily dependent on humans making the best choices for continued sustainability but, instead, reflected an admiration for the resiliency of species to adapt to ever changing circumstances.

6. Discussion

In considering these findings, the students in WALC did not fit the classic climate justice activist profile by engaging in climate marches, raising money for environmental organizations, or lobbying Congress for better environmental legislation. But when asking one student in a focus group about why his youth peers in San Francisco do not seem

engaged in youth climate movements and other forms of advocacy, his response reminded us of the role that privilege plays in any activist movement:

You could think about environmental problems—you could be worried about that, but some people have to worry about what they got going on in their own lives—if you have a roof over your head and you have food, you’re clearly living better than other people.

Much has been written about how climate protests are often spearheaded by students from privileged social groups in relatively prosperous societies (Jimenez et al., 2020). What might activism look like among youth in communities that seldom have the luxury of “taking to the streets” when they are burdened with myriad other commitments, such as caring for their siblings and parents, working to support themselves and their families?

The student’s comment speaks to our contemporary dilemma. On one hand, you can’t expect youth (or any individuals) who are struggling to meet their basic needs and dealing with daily injustices inherent in structurally oppressive societies to have the time, energy, or emotional bandwidth to engage in climate justice activism. But on the other hand, we also do not have time to first address structural inequality before engaging in the immediate and necessary work of addressing climate change and other ecological issues. Thus, what’s so notable about WALC as a model for other environmental and ethnic studies programs is that it seeks to address both simultaneously and, by building in ample time for self-reflection, to allow students to be accepting of themselves as effective and worthy learners, which is likely a necessary precondition to taking the next steps of being more informed members of a community, more diligent consumers, and more engaged social advocates. For instance, one student in a final poem assignment drew parallels between her own unleashed potential along with the flourishing of life that can take place after taking down a dam, saying,

The question is how would you feel if someone built something to hold you back? I built a wall of emotions that held me back. Making me feel trapped like I couldn’t communicate knowing that that’s what I had to do. I want to be able to knock down that wall for myself and for the river.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this study echoes previous research showing that teachers are more likely to successfully integrate social justice with environmental lessons if they have the support of their school administrations and districts (Ernst, 2012). This support is not just in terms of respecting teachers’ autonomy and curricular freedom, but also in creating avenues for success for marginalized students that do not look like the traditional school day, which has a century-long record of failing its most marginalized students (Labaree, 2010). Nonetheless, in the absence of sufficient administration support, teachers interested in getting their students to be more environmentally motivated can still learn from WALC’s pedagogy. For instance, it was clear from their daily activities that these educators routinely provided opportunities for students to cultivate their analytical reasoning, to express their creativity, and to encourage them to “not passively go through the system”. The teachers were also open to manifesting curricula to students’ needs and passions, such as feeling seen and heard by their teachers, understanding how much of their struggles aren’t individual failings but rooted in historic injustice, and how education can serve both their own liberation and that of their communities.

An important lesson from these teachers is to broaden our understanding of what it means to be a climate activist. Traditionally, this entails strategies to reduce global carbon emissions and to keep fossil fuel reserves in the ground; however, anyone fighting for justice on behalf of themselves or others is also building their personal resilience, thus making themselves more capable of addressing environmental concerns that otherwise

might be further down their list of concerns when more pressing issues (police brutality, homelessness, medical debt, etc.) are impacting their survival over environmental concerns that can seem far off and less tangible.

Another key lesson for those considering emulating WALC's curricular and pedagogical strategies is to take the time to work on one's own knowledge gaps to effectively integrate social and environmental justice education. Students in teacher education programs report not feeling as though they can teach about climate change, believing they are insufficiently knowledgeable about the topic (Kistner & Jiménez, 2023). While educators can specialize in their respective fields of expertise (humanities versus biology, for example), WALC teachers demonstrated that it is also crucial to integrate ethnic studies and ecological perspectives into teaching, viewpoints that are largely absent from the curricula of most teaching preparation programs.

Lastly, after doing the macro work of building one's pedagogical-content knowledge, the crucial remaining step for educators is the thoughtful design of their daily lessons and weekly units. Conrad says it is imperative to consider

how activities in a field trip or a unit have an arc to them and fit together to elicit from the students some very specific outcomes that the teachers wished to see. And how exactly individual parts (lessons, small assignments) build on each other so that by the end, students have a cohesive overall idea of what they were supposed to have learned.

The powerful learning outcomes as evidenced in these students' final projects are the culmination of many years of experience and countless hours of careful planning, regularly assessing the impacts of previous lessons and fine tuning them over time, especially important given the rapid pace of cultural change brought on by new technologies. How these teachers such as Conrad designed such lessons step by step will be the focus of future research.

7. Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The use of participant observations, notably field notes, allowed for researchers' personal perspectives and biases (Jackson, 1990). Additionally, participants who did not feel comfortable expressing their views in a group setting may not have fully participated in the focus group interviews (Olson, 2016). Further, WALC's existence in a liberal city and within a liberal school system is important to acknowledge and likely makes some aspects of WALC not readily transferable to other educational settings, especially now with a federal administration keen to dramatically curtail the autonomy of teachers in raising issues concerning marginalization and intersectionality in their classrooms.

8. Conclusions

Traditional social justice pedagogies that do not incorporate ecological thinking fail to prepare our future generations with the necessary roles of also being environmental stewards, which—given the gravity of the issues we're facing—cannot be outsourced to small groups of indigenous communities and permaculture enthusiasts. On the other hand, environmental education programs that do not adequately address social justice issues will not meet the needs of many of their students long marginalized by educational and other institutions and will thus prevent these individuals from reaching their full potential as citizens and social advocates. In contrast, WALC and its dedicated teachers provide exemplary models for other educators to learn from about how to infuse these perspectives into every aspect of their teaching.

Of course, it's long been a particular burden placed on U.S.-based educators, many of whom are struggling to make ends meet in under-funded schools, to somehow solve all of the problems of our country and our world within the confines of the limited hours of student contact time they have. Teachers also need the support of their local, state, and national communities to help buttress their work by creating ways for high school graduates to earn their livelihoods in ways that simultaneously work towards ensuring we can live in a fair, equitable, and ecologically flourishing world. But even within considerable budget constraints, teachers from WALC regularly showed students how their advocacy for environmental and social justice issues could move outside the school day and into their lives post-WALC.

Students were encouraged to critically engage with social media, as well as join letter-writing campaigns, organize community events, and educate their families and friends. Students pursuing tertiary education generally did so with social justice and climate justice at the fore, while those more interested in other post-graduation routes still appeared to seek out ways to better their environments, in every sense of the word. While some of their engagement and advocacy might not fit the traditional mold of more prominent climate justice youth groups such as the Sunrise Movement, in their own way they're participating in the same struggle. Nonetheless, strength lies in numbers, and one way existing climate youth groups can help bring typically underrepresented young people to contribute to their movements is to direct some of their attention to listening and learning from them. In other words, in the face of current political elites who don't even pretend to care about climate change or marginalized youth, existing youth leaders in climate movements can direct some of their energy into visiting urban communities to learn how they can be better allies, thus helping to build more grass roots community building for increased cooperation towards shared goals—environmental justice for all, including our non-human kin. The teachers' work featured here lays such a foundation, and it is a small but essential step forward in sustaining not only our own species' survival, but the wide-ranging community of life in which we are embedded.

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Notes

- ¹ These comments may have been removed from the EPA website by the time of this paper's publication.
- ² For the purposes of this study, marginalized students (Labaree, 2010) are defined as those systematically relegated to the periphery of educational opportunity due to structural inequalities within the education system. These students often face exclusion from full participation and success in schooling based on factors such as race, language, ability, or social class.
- ³ Again, this reflects a current trend that may be stalling and perhaps reversing in the current political climate.
- ⁴ Nevertheless, researchers report that K–12 climate justice education is still impeded by limited support for teachers and a lack of rigorously evaluated curriculum resources.

- ⁵ Although Catherine wasn't specifically citing Zoe Weil's solutionary framework (Weil, 2024), there are notable parallels with Weil's work in fostering empathy for other species in educational lessons and settings.

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Article

Everyday Activism Performances and Liminal Political Positionings of Early Youth in Bulgaria: Learning to Be Environmental Subjects

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Abstract

Research on climate activism has predominantly focused on affluent regions of the Global North, often emphasizing public participation and protest while overlooking the experiences of youth in other contexts. This study addresses this gap by exploring everyday environmental activism and eco-literacy among young people in Bulgaria, a post-communist society. It challenges the prevailing top-down political frameworks that marginalize diverse forms of political participation. This study argues that young people's environmental awareness, shaped by their lived experiences, reflects their engagement with consumerism and climate change and is expressed through various modes of participation, including the victim, voter, rejecter, and interpreter forms of agency. Drawing on ethnographic data from interviews, mapping activities, and short essays, this research examines how environmental identities are enacted in mundane ways that reflect young people's levels of eco-literacy, focusing on a cohort from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds in both urban and rural contexts. The findings reveal the performances of everyday environmental activism and shed light on the liminal political positions youth navigate in their daily lives. This research contributes to education studies by offering insights into how young people's everyday environmental activism and eco-literacy, rooted in their subjectivities, transcend traditional educational frameworks and provide a deeper understanding of how they learn to become environmental subjects in under-represented contexts.

Keywords: everyday activism; youth environmental citizenship; performativity; eco-literacy; climate change; consumption

1. Introduction

In the late modern era, young people face uneven consequences of environmental crises such as climate change and biodiversity loss (IPCC, 2021). These challenges are compounded by the pervasive influence of consumer capitalism, which accelerates ecological degradation (Marques, 2020). Simultaneously, digital media and popular culture often overshadow traditional education, leaving many youths as passive bystanders amid growing ecological instability (Mustola et al., 2018; Firinci Orman, 2022). They experience various emotions tied to climate change and its injustices as these issues traverse interconnected "online" and "offline" spaces (Chiew et al., 2024). However, the impacts of these crises on young people differ, shaped by their unique social, economic, and geographic contexts. In this landscape, learning and education emerge as a critical site for examining and addressing how young people navigate, resist, or are shaped by the intersecting forces

of climate crises, consumerism, and digital culture, primarily through their experiential knowledge, which reflects their political positioning and eco-literacy.

While youth responses to climate instability are frequently examined through the lens of mass mobilization, this perspective reflects significant biases in the literature. Much research focuses on affluent, Global North contexts, neglecting the experiences of marginalized youth from underprivileged regions (Neas et al., 2022; Karsgaard & Shultz, 2022). The emphasis on Western geographies and figures like Greta Thunberg limits our understanding of youth climate activism. As Neas et al. (2022) note, studies disproportionately center on wealthy communities, overlooking youth in socioeconomically disadvantaged positions whose political participation and environmental identities evolve under different conditions.

A key gap in the literature is the limited research on youth climate activism in post-communist societies, particularly in non-wealthy contexts. In Europe, these transitional countries, shaped by democratization and EU integration, continue to bear socialist legacies such as institutional mistrust, social inequalities, and regional disparities, all of which significantly influence young people's political participation. While some studies have explored youth agency in alternative non-Western regions—such as Brazil (Börner et al., 2021), the MENA region (Ortiz et al., 2024) and Taiwan (Chang, 2022)—post-communist Eastern Europe remains underexplored. These countries face unique challenges in addressing environmental issues due to the high material costs of climate protection and limited innovation (Drieschova, 2024). Yet, grassroots environmental activism is emerging, particularly around urban development, labor rights, and minority issues, with environmental concerns gaining prominence (Henry et al., 2024).

This article addresses critical gaps in the literature by exploring how Bulgarian youth, shaped by their post-communist sociopolitical context, engage in everyday environmental activism. This study adopts the “performative citizenship framework,” which allows for an analysis of environmental citizenship formation from the bottom up. It also unpacks youths' subjective capacities through their lived experiences, reflecting the youthful ways of being and becoming (Firinci Orman, 2022, 2023; Firinci Orman & Demiral, 2023). The rationale for this approach is grounded in three key considerations.

First, the limited number of existing studies on climate activism in post-communist societies often rely on political culture frameworks (e.g., anti-corruption protests) (see Damyanova, 2023), which overlook informal and non-formal forms of youth participation—crucial for understanding early youth engagement. Second, while youth research in Bulgaria frequently incorporates intersectionality and identity politics, particularly concerning minority groups (e.g., Roma youth) (see Stoytchev, 2023), it rarely addresses activism within the context of climate change. This gap limits our understanding of how Bulgarian youth navigate and respond to environmental issues in their specific sociopolitical environment. Third, while the literature on youth climate activism incorporates intersectional and justice-oriented frameworks, it often emphasizes large-scale mobilizations (e.g., Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion) (see Della Porta & Portos, 2023). This emphasis overlooks the everyday forms of activism that, though less visible, are vital for understanding how young people perform and negotiate their environmental identities and eco-literacy.

However, everyday activism, distinct from large-scale mobilizations, highlights the mundane yet significant ways young people express and perform their environmental identities in daily life (Firinci Orman, 2022; Trott, 2021; Skovdal & Benwell, 2021; Navne & Skovdal, 2021; Ojala, 2020). Drawing on partial data from a larger multisite ethnographic research project on youth environmental citizenship, this study explores how young people in Bulgaria navigate consumerism and climate action in their everyday lives while living in a rapidly transforming society.

Bulgaria's post-communist welfare regime provides a complex backdrop for studying youth activism. As a semi-consolidated democracy, Bulgaria continues to grapple with democratic challenges, reflecting broader regional tensions between democratic and autocratic influences (Smeltzer & Karppi, 2024). Although the country benefits from European Union funding that maintains a semblance of institutional stability, these structures often mask deeper political and economic problems (Rone & Junes, 2021).

Youth political participation in Bulgaria, similar to other Eastern and Baltic countries with a communist past, is generally low due to historical detachment and skepticism toward politics. This skepticism refers to the formal and institutional aspects of governance and public affairs, reflecting a historical distrust of or disengagement from these systems. However, Bulgaria shows relatively higher levels of electoral participation compared to countries like Portugal and the UK (Lello & Bazzoli, 2023). Economic and social inequalities, however, negatively impact young people's participation in democratic life (Brestnichka, 2022; Zahariev & Yordanov, 2023). Recent mass protests in Bulgaria reflect emerging grassroots environmental activism addressing specific issues, such as biodiversity loss due to construction projects, mining and illegal logging, and degradation of protected natural areas against private business interests and investments (see Mihaylov, 2020; Bogdanova, 2024), among other concerns. These movements are largely organized via social networks, which enhance youth engagement and government outreach, particularly through social media tools (Pastarmadzhieva & Sakal, 2021).

Despite increased interest in climate change education, many youths remain marginalized from the conversation, as the research is still primarily situated in the Global North (see Firinci Orman, 2024; Karsgaard & Shultz, 2022). Although fields like civic and environmental education exist in Bulgaria, there is a lack of literature on how these programs impact young people as environmental citizens (Manov & Keranova, 2019). A national survey indicated that young people engage in citizen science initiatives mainly out of a desire to care for nature, contribute to conservation, and learn about the natural world (Tsvetkova et al., 2022).

The first section of this article reviews the limited literature on everyday environmental activism and builds on the lived and performative framework of youth environmental citizenship. This framework facilitates an exploration of youth eco-literacy at the nexus of consumerism and climate change and examines the modes of participation and political agency of young people. This article then addresses methodological considerations, including participant characteristics, the empirical stages of this study, and the ethical principles guiding this research. Following this, the results highlight how participants enact their environmental identities through various forms of political participation and how this relates to their eco-literacy. The discussion centers on the liminal positioning of youth identities, shaped by formal and informal educational contexts as well as urban and rural environmental experiences. Finally, the conclusion examines how these everyday actions reflect and perform youthful environmental identities, emphasizing their role in expressing and shaping their subjectivities.

2. Everyday Activism Through the Lenses of Performativity and Eco-Literacy

2.1. Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework

This study builds on a multisite project that incorporates relational ontologies through an interdisciplinary lens on youth political agency, drawing from youth geographies, environmental education, and citizenship studies. It critiques adult-led green values and environmental ideologies while proposing bottom-up methodological approaches to studying the youthful aspects of environmental citizenship formation. Particularly informed

by performative citizenship (Isin, 2008), I propose an analytical framework based on the multifaceted forms of youth political participation (Firinci Orman, 2022). This framework captures the complexity and plurality of young people's political positioning in the context of everyday activism through four intersecting, interchangeable, and coexisting categories: *victim* (e.g., exposure to consumerist culture and/or other structural inequalities), *voter* (e.g., boycotting or "buycotting" goods, services, companies, or countries as green or ethical consumers and/or voting in school parliament for a more sustainable school environment), *rejecter* (e.g., climate change activism through public civic participation), and *interpreter* (e.g., the politicization of everyday life choices that are ethically, morally, or politically inspired, creatively practiced in mundane ways, and reflecting green lifestyles) (Firinci Orman, 2022). These categories reflect relational modes of political participation embodied in youths' everyday lives (Firinci Orman, 2021). Such practices are particularly evident in environmental contexts (Firinci Orman, 2024), and the categories serve as analytical lenses in the current study.

To further elaborate, *victim* agency is characterized by limited critical awareness, resignation, feelings of hopelessness, and inaction. In the context of this study, it is often shaped by exposure to consumerist culture and adult-led ideologies. More broadly, it can be understood as a form of engagement within a political system or major event where young people have little to no agency or voice. *Voter* agency involves a sense of civic duty and trust in democratic processes, including environmentally responsible consumer choices. However, both categories tend to be shaped by macro-level influences and adult-led structures (Firinci Orman, 2023). As a child-led category, *rejecter* agency represents resistance against dominant ideologies, advocating for radical change and challenging the status quo, as exemplified by youth climate activism, such as school strikes (see Thomas et al., 2019). Lastly, *interpreter* agency combines elements of both the voter and rejecter positions, enabling young people to creatively reinterpret environmental ideologies. This agency promotes reflexivity, direct forms of everyday activism, and the adoption of green lifestyles that challenge top-down environmentalism (Firinci Orman, 2022). Interpretive agency merges consumer practices with collective efforts for sustainability, framing green choices as politicized actions for social change (see Schlosberg, 2019).

2.2. Literature Review

To situate the analytical framework within the broader literature, I will focus on three foundational concepts that shape this study: *youth environmental citizenship*, *everyday environmental activism*, and *eco-literacy*.

Youth environmental citizenship encompasses both formal, public political engagement (big-P politics) and informal, everyday political practices (little-p politics) (Kallio & Häkli, 2013). This duality is essential, as it acknowledges that youth navigate global and local realities, which intertwine in the micropolitics of daily life (Katz, 2004). Citizenship studies further emphasize the performative dimensions of citizenship through "acts of citizenship" (Isin, 2008), highlighting the embodied, lived experiences of youth as political actors (Firinci Orman, 2022; Kallio, 2016; Kallio et al., 2020).

Within this context, critical scholarship on youth geographies explores how environmental subjectivities and identities are shaped through spatial and relational processes. Bartos (2013) and Wood (2012) highlight that young people's everyday politics emerge through socialization within family, peer networks, and local communities. Skelton (2013) further emphasized the role of mobility in shaping youth agency, linking environmental engagement to lived spatial experiences. Other accounts underscore the significance of youth, relationality, spatiality, and civic engagement (Worth, 2024; Gordon et al., 2016), introducing geographical approaches that align with lived experiences.

Kallio et al. (2020), in their review, further conceptualize lived citizenship, defining it through four key dimensions—spatial, intersubjective, performed, and affective—and demonstrating its relevance to childhood and youth studies. This framework examines how young people experience and enact citizenship in their everyday lives, extending beyond formal political participation. Influenced by Ruth Lister (2008), it challenges the exclusion of children based on age or economic dependence. Research on lived citizenship highlights how citizenship is expressed through everyday actions and relationships in both private and public spaces, emphasizing agency and resistance (Lister, 2008; Bartos, 2013; Olsson, 2017). Building on these critical perspectives, the present study examines young people's everyday activism as it is lived and performed in their daily lives.

Although there is a growing body of work on environmental activism and green lifestyles, the literature on *everyday environmental activism* remains limited, particularly concerning young people. Skovdal and Benwell (2021) describe research on youth climate activism as underdeveloped, although emerging studies have begun addressing independent youth agency (see Collins, 2020), the temporalities of activism (Nissen et al., 2020), and the spatial and mundane dimensions of everyday climate activism (Börner et al., 2021; Navne & Skovdal, 2021). These studies suggest that young people's environmental activism is multifaceted, deeply embedded in lived experiences, and shaped by their political agency in daily life (see Firinci Orman, 2022).

Everyday environmental activism refers to activities and practices aimed at addressing social, political, and economic issues through changes in personal and collective behavior (Ojala, 2015). This activism can take many forms, from collective responses such as alternative food and energy systems (Schlosberg & Coles, 2016) to more individualized actions such as anti-consumption behaviors reflecting environmental values (Black & Cherrier, 2010). As Collins (2020) highlights, young people, closely integrated into family and peer networks, play a pivotal role in driving environmental behavior change. They serve as connectors between their families and larger political issues, influenced by emotional connections to their surroundings and possessions, shaping perspectives on issues like waste management and conservation in their consumption practices. Youth often express their environmental citizenship through both individual and collective actions, which blur into their everyday lives and intersect with social identities, including gender, class, and ethnicity (see Firinci Orman & Demiral, 2023).

The literature also explores different forms of activism, distinguishing between direct protest and quieter forms of social or collective action. These quieter forms often lack formal organization, focus on local issues, and are rooted in the daily lives of ordinary citizens (Sundstrom et al., 2022; Polese et al., 2018). Similarly, Bherer et al. (2023) argue that informal participation prioritizes concrete action over discussion or deliberation, distinguishing it from traditional activism. They highlight concepts like quiet activism and implicit activism, which emphasize subtle, everyday engagement rather than vocal or visible protest. As noted earlier, activism is sometimes perceived negatively or associated with privileged, urban contexts (Bell, 2020; Walker, 2021). Thus, there is growing recognition of the need for intersectional perspectives that consider the diverse backgrounds and experiences of young activists (Walker & van Holstein, 2024).

Beyond the urban context, only a limited number of studies have explored rural youth activism—though not specifically in the context of environmental activism—while highlighting differences in socio-spatial engagement (e.g., Suppers, 2023; Baylina & Rodó-Zárate, 2020; Petrović & Čikić, 2021). For example, Suppers' (2023) study in rural communities in Germany finds that rural youth engage in ad hoc, part-time activism, demanding systemic change through actions like raising awareness and making consumer choices. Their activism, often linked with volunteering, takes place in diverse spaces such as online

platforms, local municipalities, schools, and everyday settings like supermarkets. Another study on Serbian rural youth (involving ten villages in Vojvodina) (see Petrović & Čikić, 2021) concludes that young people in villages are aware of the challenges they face but remain politically passive, feeling their actions are ineffective and experiencing a sense of social powerlessness.

Regarding *eco-literacy*, the scholarship underscores how young people's environmental awareness shapes their activism. Eco-literacy, which involves understanding the relationships between ecological systems and human activity, plays a critical role in informing environmentally responsible behavior (Piscitelli & D'Uggento, 2022). Youth with high levels of eco-literacy are more likely to connect personal actions, such as consumer choices, to broader environmental issues like climate change (Firinci Orman, 2024). This connection reflects the critical-thinking and decision-making skills young people employ as they navigate the intersection of consumerism and environmental responsibility in their daily lives. An eco-literate person understands the world and actively contributes to sustainability through intellectual, emotional, and practical efforts (McBride et al., 2013), demonstrating reflexivity, agency, and a readiness to participate in daily activism and embrace an eco-friendly lifestyle. An important exploration comes from Dunkley (2018) and van Herten and Perez (2022), highlighting the spatial and temporal aspects of eco-literacy, emphasizing the need for learning experiences that connect nature and culture within specific socio-ecological contexts. Dunkley (2018) shows that such space–time-aware encounters are central to developing eco-pedagogy and eco-literacy, regardless of the setting.

Accordingly, many young people learn about climate change both online and offline (at school, home, or other contexts) through social interactions and lived experiences. Eco-literacy has been studied in terms of school environments (e.g., Zulfa & Sari, 2024), intergenerational learning (e.g., Ismawati et al., 2024) and social media (e.g., Abdullah, 2023), among others, predominantly within the environmental education scholarship. However, when it comes to the discourse around climate activism, it has often been dominated by youth movements communicated through protests and media. While Greta Thunberg's influence has mobilized many, her prominence overshadows research showing inequalities in climate activism and its relational nature. For example, one study highlights how intersecting educational and socioeconomic inequalities shape environmental–political participation among young Londoners, limiting their agency (Arya & Henn, 2023). Thaker (2024) notes that despite comparatively limited media coverage of climate change in poorer and developing countries, citizens in these areas perceive climate change as a greater risk and are more willing to protest than those in developed nations. This reflects the structural limitations in environmental–political agency present across different contexts.

3. Materials and Methods

Drawing on interdisciplinary insights from geography, sociology, environmental studies, and related fields, this study employs the geo-social methodology, which provides a relational ontological approach that enriches traditional qualitative methods (Creswell, 2013). It examines the interplay between social dynamics and spatial contexts, with a focus on subjective experiences within these settings. Furthermore, it reconceptualizes socialization by integrating intersubjective, spatial, and political dimensions, as highlighted by scholars such as Elwood and Mitchell (2012), Kallio (2018), and Joronen (2016).

This research focuses on the everyday experiences of young people in Bulgaria. By applying an analytical and performative framework to study their environmental identities through political participation modes (Firinci Orman, 2022, 2023), it explores the social, spatial, and politicized dynamics that shape their environmental actions, reflecting the geo-social nature of the data (Kallio, 2020). By incorporating narratives of daily life, this

study reveals how everyday environmentalism intersects with views and actions on climate change, illustrating the levels of eco-literate worldviews that emerge at the nexus of their consumption- and climate-related behaviors (Firinci Orman, 2024).

The researcher utilized a pragmatic sampling approach, underpinned by an intersectional framework, to select 13 youth participants aged 12–19 from diverse regions across Bulgaria, leveraging existing academic networks. Participants were purposively chosen based on their leadership roles within schools or communities, primarily through civic engagement or institutional involvement in a range of activities, including charity events, school competitions, club activities, and sports/music-related leisure pursuits. The sample was intentionally designed to reflect diverse social positions, encompassing the dimensions of gender, ethnicity, religion, and class. The majority of participants were of Bulgarian descent, with additional representation from the Turkish, Armenian, and Roma ethnicities. One participant identified as Muslim, and four participants had cross-cultural parentage (Bulgarian–Greek, Bulgarian–Jewish). The gender distribution included five participants identifying as male and the remainder as female. Socioeconomically, the participants represented a broad spectrum: two from lower-income families, three from upper-income families, and the majority from middle-class backgrounds. Two participants were placed in foster care. The sample also captured diverse mobility experiences, with most participants having relocated between different neighborhoods or cities, except for one. Geographically, participants hailed from varied regions, including northeastern Bulgaria, the Black Sea coast, mid-western Bulgaria, and southwestern Bulgaria, with the majority (nine participants) at the time residing in urban areas and four in semi-rural settings, one of whom lives in a small village. The participants attended a variety of schools, including general secondary schools, foreign language schools (French and German), schools with advanced STEM education, and private institutions. Notably, none of the participants were engaged in global youth climate activism; however, one participant was involved in a local grassroots environmental initiative within Bulgaria. Although the sample may appear relatively small and limited in scope, it remains rich and in-depth, aligning with this study's objective of exploring the subjectivities and identity formation of the participants, reflecting diversity in terms of the socio-cultural, geographical, and spatial dimensions.

Geo-social data were collected through a combination of online mapping, interviews, and essay-writing activities. Each participant began with an online mapping exercise on Padlet, where they marked significant locations—neighborhoods, cities, and regions—reflecting on their climate-related lived experiences. Participants used colors to represent emotional responses, creating a semi-public space for sharing perspectives and fostering a collective understanding of climate action and consumerism. This mapping exercise, grounded in Kallio's (2021) topological approach, explored subjectivity, spatial attachments, and the political dimensions of climate experiences (see Firinci Orman, 2024).

After the mapping exercise, semi-structured online interviews were conducted, focusing on participants' everyday lives, consumption habits, and climate-related actions. The mapping notes informed the interviews, deepening the exploration of participants' lived experiences, particularly in relation to eco-literacy and political awareness. Guided by the geo-social methodology, the interviews examined the social, spatial, and political dimensions of participants' climate actions. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to gain insights into young people's relational worlds.

The final data collection stage involved an essay-writing task, where participants reflected on their roles as environmental citizens and consumers. The essays, which varied in length and were free-form, encouraged participants to critically evaluate their consumption practices and the research experience, promoting self-awareness and deeper engagement with climate issues.

The analysis generated geo-social profiles for each participant by triangulating data from the mapping, interviews, and essays. The criteria for generating individual reports involved analytical layers of the geo-social methodology, building on a threefold conceptual baseline: social relatedness, spatial relationality, and experience-based politics (Kallio, 2020). Due to the relatively small sample size, this process was performed manually. By comparing and contrasting the data, this study examined the subjectivities of young people, highlighting how social relationships and spatial dynamics influenced the participants' environmental identities. This study also explored the key people, places, and events that shaped their views (see Kallio, 2018; Firinci Orman & Demiral, 2023), mainly on climate change and consumption. Additionally, performative aspects of youth environmental citizenship (see Firinci Orman, 2022) were used to examine various lived experiences in the context of everyday consumer practices and climate change actions, considering different modes of political participation among young people (e.g., victim, voter, interpreter, rejected) (Firinci Orman, 2023). Finally, as the data provide rich information and details on participants' consumption habits and everyday decision-making related to climate actions, participants' eco-literacy was observed based on whether they link their personal actions, such as consumption, to broader issues like climate change (McBride et al., 2013), with a focus on their everyday performances and contributions to sustainability through intellectual, emotional, and/or practical efforts.

Ethical Principles Guiding This Study

This study is dedicated to upholding the participation rights of children and young people, framing climate and environmental change as a critical long-term threat to these rights. It emphasizes collaboration with young people to provide insights into youth environmental citizenship, aiming to foster a more sustainable future. The researcher strictly adhered to ethical standards to ensure the protection of all participants throughout this study.

The research posed a minimal risk, relying on qualitative interviews that prioritized participants' well-being and empowered them to guide the process while fostering eco-literacy and sustainable behaviors. This study created a safe, judgment-free environment where participants could freely express themselves throughout the interviews. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants, including parental consent, with clear communication of this study's purpose and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any time.

Confidentiality was ensured through strict anonymization of the data and secure storage. Consultations with local experts and scholars experienced in working with vulnerable youth further strengthened this study's ethical robustness, guiding recruitment, consent processes, and the safeguarding of sensitive information. This study adhered to the core ethical principles of "respect for persons" (ensuring informed and voluntary participation), "beneficence" (minimizing potential harm), and "justice" (ensuring fair and equitable treatment). Special attention was paid to upholding these principles during interactions with youth participants, particularly in consideration of their diverse backgrounds.

4. Results

4.1. Youthful Profiles and Environmental Action: Examining Everyday Performances and Eco-Literate Worldviews

Not all young people engage with environmental activism in the same way; their motivations, aspirations, and understandings of environmental care differ, as shaped by their lived experiences. Their everyday activism and environmental care practices are influenced by varying levels of eco-literate worldviews, which integrate intellectual, emotional, and

practical efforts. These worldviews underpin their environmental awareness, skills, and critical perspectives, enabling informed decision-making and active participation in daily life. Guided by the performative framework of youth environmental citizenship (see Firinci Orman, 2022) as analytical lenses, this section is structured through four overlapping and dynamic categories of political participation among youth—*victim* (represented by the registered bystander profile), *voter* (represented by the eco-conscious participant profile), *rejecter* (represented by the climate advocate profile), and *interpreter* (represented by the reflective practitioner profile)—each reflecting different levels of eco-literacy.

I draw on youth profiles, chosen as they reflect these four categories of political participation among youth, and illustrate how young people's agency is shaped by their level of eco-literacy. I also examine how this, in turn, manifests in their everyday lives through both environmental action and inaction. While the selected youth profiles are representative of different performative aspects of youth participation and agency, they are singular cases encompassing numerous subjective and personal elements. Therefore, they should not be interpreted as generalizable or scalable profiles.

4.1.1. Resigned Bystander

Lidia (19), a foster care recipient from coastal Bulgaria, has minimal consumption practices, limited to purchasing coffee and cigarettes due to her tight budget. Occasionally, she buys items she likes from Shein, a Chinese fast fashion retailer. Like many participants, her understanding of nature and climate change is shaped by her experiences with waste management issues. She viewed numerous Bulgarian cities as polluted and criticized local authorities for corruption and inadequate municipal services. Lidia specifically highlighted the industrial outskirts of her city, marked by factories, polluted air, and broken, muddy roads, which she described as “disgustingly dirty”. Her environmental awareness seems largely centered on waste, as her references to climate change consistently returned to the issue of garbage. She contrasted her city with Brussels, referencing her visits there and praising its cleanliness and effective waste management, underscoring how her personal experiences shaped her views on environmental issues. In her own words:

“Most pollution happens because waste isn’t disposed of separately, or nature isn’t kept clean, and many trees are cut down. The way we humans consume, instead of helping us live cleaner lives, ends up harming us. By throwing garbage wherever we want or leaving it anywhere, not only is it very ugly, but it also shows a lack of respect for our bodies and our lives”.

Studies on youth engagement in everyday environmental politics show that young people in urban environments often deprioritize environmental issues due to economic precarity and limited opportunities to reflect on the relevance of such issues in their daily lives (Sloam, 2020). Lidia's narrative similarly aligns with “victim” agency, as she explained that her involvement is limited to throwing her garbage in designated places when visiting outside locations, but she showed little concern for waste management in her own living space (care center). She explained her stance as follows:

“Well, honestly, it’s not so much about recycling—we’re not all fans of it. We’re just trying to make our coexistence here a little more interesting, though it doesn’t work out much”.

Lidia's agency is characterized by her limited critical environmental awareness, which revolves around garbage and waste collection. Her perspective fosters a pessimistic view toward immediate action, positioning her as a bystander. However, she expressed that in the future, once living independently, she would be more inclined to engage in recycling within her own household.

4.1.2. Eco-Conscious Participant

Anahit (18), who resides in southern Bulgaria, with a wealthy and highly educated family background, exemplifies a “voter” type of agency through her active engagement in civil society activities related to social problems, including environmental protection. As a young leader, she participated in student clubs, served on the student council, got involved in entrepreneurial training, and engaged in social projects. Additionally, she took part in a youth training initiative focused on learning sustainability and organized a community at her school to educate peers about climate change. These experiences appear to have fostered her positive attitude toward environmental action. Anahit maintained eco-friendly shopping habits, avoiding fast fashion and fast food. She explained her approach:

“First, I ask myself if I really need the item. Next, I consider whether it comes from a responsible brand. Because I know that some brands may use illegal labor or misrepresent their practices on their labels. Therefore, I make an effort to research brands in advance to ensure they are responsible in some way”.

Her everyday environmental actions included addressing local issues and implementing basic conservation practices, such as turning off lights, conserving water, and promoting simple, everyday actions. She also educated younger children on proper waste disposal and reducing plastic use. Furthermore, she advocated for more affordable, eco-friendly alternatives, noting the high cost of paper bags compared to plastic and suggesting that companies should offer cheaper, sustainable options. She remarked:

“I forgot my reusable bag and had to buy a new paper bag at Kaufland. I discovered that these paper bags were at least three to four times more expensive than plastic ones. As a result, some people who can’t afford the higher cost might opt for plastic bags instead. It’s important to note that this issue isn’t entirely the fault of consumers”.

During the interview, Anahit argued that consumers should make informed choices and signal their values to companies, as firms often prioritize profit over climate considerations. Her underlying argument was that consumer actions can influence corporate practices by creating demand for ethical and environmentally responsible practices.

As such, Anahit’s pro-environmental attitude is evident through her institutional participation, advocacy, and everyday actions. Her positive relationships with parents, teachers, and other adult role models, along with her active engagement in her school’s participatory activities, have seemingly been highly effective in fostering her environmental awareness and shaping her eco-literate worldview.

4.1.3. Climate Advocate

Daniel (15), from the capital city, is an activist involved in a movement aimed at stopping the construction of the Struma motorway in Bulgaria, which crosses the Kresna Gorge, one of Europe’s biodiversity hotspots. He exercised a form of marginalized agency by supporting the cause and participating in protests alongside friends who influenced him to get involved. He expressed hope that their protests will succeed in halting the construction, despite years of unsuccessful efforts. He explained what he, his friends, and the Save Kresna community think as the construction has started: *“There’s still hope. . . Hope dies last! We hope to keep the Gorge”.*

Daniel’s activism was also evident in his everyday practices as a responsible consumer. He preferred buying local food to support people in disadvantaged areas who rely on small businesses in rural food production. He was strongly critical of corporate exploitation of nature and resources.

Research shows that protests are particularly effective in fostering political engagement, serving as catalysts for politicization (Crouzé et al., 2024). As a fan of water sports,

Daniel's attachment to his cause was further expressed through activities like rowing and participating in nature clean-up events. He politicized water resources in this context. During a mapping activity, he marked a resort village with a dam, which he frequently visited to collect garbage, an experience he described as important and rewarding. In the interview, he further explained these activities:

"Yes, garbage is collected; we go to a location, and it's gathered into sacks. People are given gloves and bags. We go to different shores, and the trash is gathered at several spots... larger amounts, with a few sacks. Then, a big boat comes and collects it".

Daniel had a direct connection to the countryside, where he gardened with his father, fostering a love for water and nature, along with other life experiences that deepened his connection to the environment. Despite living in a big city, the family lifestyle and habits he grew up with seem to have played a significant role in raising his environmental awareness. His eco-literacy was evident in his reflections on the link between consumer behavior and the climate crisis:

"Consumption facilitates the worst actions for nature. It's easier to throw your trash in one place than to recycle it. Things that are worse for nature are cheaper. Simply because a person says, 'I am only one person, so it's not so bad,' but half the world decides to do exactly the same thing and chooses the cheapest option, which is worse for nature".

Daniel argued that while an individual may seem insignificant in the larger population, their daily actions, such as buying and discarding single-use items like water bottles, accumulate over time. This collective waste from everyday products builds up daily, which is why he carried a refillable bottle with him. Alongside his public activism, his advocacy for everyday activism was also evident in his belief that small, consistent actions can make a difference: *"Even if it's small, I think it's a change. Some small decisions every day... For example, not taking a separate bag for absolutely everything. Little things like that".*

Daniel's activism, in both the public and private spheres, reflected his "rejecter" agency, as he engaged in activities aimed at promoting environmental protection and influencing policy changes.

4.1.4. Reflective Practitioner

Nikolai (18) comes from a Black Sea coastal city and attends one of the top high schools. He demonstrated a high level of digital and eco-literacy, limiting his social media use to a minimum while choosing primarily scientific content to consume. He verified the sources of the information he encountered and primarily used YouTube channels to explore his interests, such as math, history, and languages, through educational content. He mentioned following channels like MinuteEarth to study climate change in just 3 min, and he explained how the marine fauna of Antarctica has been impacted by crabs:

"They're very big crabs, not just crabs, but such big crabs. Yes. Normally, they couldn't cross the line that separates the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, and I'm talking about the upper oceans, with the Antarctic. Their blood is such that if it gets too cold, they fall asleep and don't wake up until it's warmer. So, if they get there, they simply never wake up. But now, as it gets warmer, they can increase their range. Scientists shared research that says about 15 percent of the fauna remains after the crabs arrive at a new location. That's a little sad".

When discussing his consumption practices and preferences, Nikolai noted that he was not attached to any particular brand, not even for technology, and was fine with using items until they were completely worn out. While he preferred to support local food and businesses when shopping, he made it clear that he never wears fast fashion, opting instead for tracksuits and sweatshirts. He did not care what others think and said, *"I don't want to*

be pretty. I want it to be comfortable". He added that while he does not like buying things unless necessary, he often spends on software for maths, which he described as "much more fun!" He noted: *"I would rather use my clothes and shoes longer, for as long as possible. For example, I don't know. . . Some of my shoes are galoshes. I use them as galoshes now"*.

Research highlights that young people are increasingly aware of the multifaceted injustices of the climate crisis and are taking action to secure a sustainable future for all (Trott, 2024b). Nikolai politicized global inequalities between the Global North and South, sharing a wealth of information about issues like people's mobilization, racism, and colonial histories. He chose not to buy chocolate and vanilla, knowing that while many products bear fair trademarks, they still exploit child labor, as he claimed. He boycotted these goods to protest unethical practices and address these injustices.

The following quote showcases his eco-literacy and belief in technological solutions, which made him hopeful for tackling climate change. During the interview, he expressed, with a historical perspective, that some solutions or discoveries, for example in math and geometry, take time to become useful or relevant, but eventually, they can have a significant impact, even if it takes centuries for their true value to be realized. Similarly, he said:

"It is the same with renewable energy where the more money they put in, at some point, it got cheaper. The state invests, but private investors do, too. . . After all, we're fine with technology. We're not like before, where jumping from farming to metallurgy took a few thousand years".

Nikolai's "interpreter" agency and sustainable behaviors, reflecting his eco-literacy and anti-consumerist stance, combined elements of both the voter and rejecter positions, allowing him to creatively reinterpret environmental ideologies, though he did not engage in public activism. His agency was evident in the following quote, where he explained that his distrust of the municipality's garbage collection and controversial recycling practices stopped him from engaging in daily recycling efforts. He shared his own idea for an alternative solution, though he admitted to procrastinating in terms of taking action:

"The most I've thought is to try to do something like my own analysis, give it to the municipality, and try to create a new system that's more efficient and different. It's not just about giving people money—though that always helps—but finding ways to earn money as well. For example, improving the trash system. For human feces, which are mostly non-hostile, not harmful, only about 0.1% might carry disease. Most of it can be repurposed. It can be used as fertilizer, to feed animals, or more specifically, you could feed it to bugs, and then feed the bugs to animals. Yes, it can be used in many different ways. That would be great instead of. . . I don't know".

4.2. Liminal Spaces That Shape Young People's Political Positionings

Studying liminal spaces through geo-social data is central to the performative citizenship framework, as it reveals how young people participate and act within dynamic social contexts in an everyday context (see Firinci Orman, 2022). By examining youths' lived environmental subjectivities, participation modes and decision-making, we gain insights into their climate responses that surpass traditional, adult-led values and political participation (Firinci Orman, 2023; Firinci Orman & Demiral, 2023). These "in-between" political spaces, where power relations intersect, are crucial for understanding how young people perform activism, make (eco-literate) decisions and enact their environmental citizenship through strategic, everyday practices (Firinci Orman, 2022, 2024).

4.2.1. In-Between Formal and Informal Learnings

Young people encounter climate change information from diverse sources, which function as varied learning spaces influencing their eco-literacy. Traditional education,

primarily delivered through schools and formal sciences, presents climate change predominantly through scientific lenses, addressing issues such as global warming and biodiversity loss. However, this formal education often overlooks the sociopolitical and justice dimensions of the climate crisis (Trott, 2024a). In contrast, social media platforms serve as a second, and in some cases primary, source of climate information for young people. Greta Thunberg's impactful social media presence has mobilized a significant youth climate movement and highlighted the moral imperative of addressing the structural causes of ecological crises. Yet, social media also provides a platform for climate change sceptics, complicating the discourse (Mede & Schroeder, 2024). Interestingly, only one participant (18) from the capital city referred to Greta Thunberg's movement and activism, albeit in a rather skeptical manner. While deeply concerned about the environment and anxious about the future of the planet, this young participant's stance gradually shifted to oppose such activism.

Most participants indicated that they learned about climate change from both schools and the internet, with social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook playing a significant role. Although the sample is not representative of the broader youth population in Bulgaria, the majority (9 out of 13) of participants reported the internet to be their primary information source on climate change and environmental preservation. The rest, while engaging with social media content, said they received almost all their climate-related information at school. Half of the participants also mentioned their involvement in school- or teacher-initiated environmental projects, such as tree planting, climate solution competitions, specialized climate change training programs, garbage collection, nature park clean-ups, and recycling initiatives like collecting bottle caps in the school's recycling container.

For example, Viktoria (17), from a small city, explained that while she needed to use social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook) to promote her work as a public figure and artist, her priority space for learning and discussing climate and environmental matters was initially school:

"Well, I'm basically focused on geography. We have 5-6 h of geography a week, and we study a lot... it's hard, so to speak. The sad thing is that lately, you don't find much information about global changes on social networks. People don't upload that kind of content. Or even if they do, it's not recommended or shown, like on TikTok, it doesn't appear in your feed. But lately, in school, we've been doing more debates in geography class. We don't take many new lessons anymore, but we often talk about these things".

A recent study revealed that young people also learn about climate justice both in and outside of school through activist networks (Mayes, 2024). For instance, Daniel (15), from the capital city, shared that he followed the social media accounts of the grassroots environmental movement he is involved in, learning mostly from his friends and community activism about climate change and environmental preservation. While peers and community are effective, learning can take place in different contexts too. Viktoria (17) further shared that climate change topics were also discussed within her family, similar to a couple of other participants, primarily through intergenerational learning. She shared that her grandfather cut out newspaper articles on global warming for her, while her grandmother listened to radio news about climate events like wildfires and engaged her in conversations about them. These exchanges seemed to deepen Viktoria's understanding of environmental issues.

Similarly, Nina (17), from a small border city, participated in an eco-oriented competition organized by schools with two classmates. Their project aimed to reduce food waste by creating animal feed pellets from food scraps using an extruder machine. Their idea reached the finals, and Nina was impressed by the increasing number of eco-focused

competitions she has encountered. Recently, she also shared attending a five-day ecology camp in Western Bulgaria with seven other students.

Anahit (18), from a coastal city and a wealthy family, attended a highly competitive and well-regarded foreign language school. She noted that during the 10th and 11th grades, she specialized in history, geography, geopolitics, political science, economics, and sociology, with mathematics as a secondary focus. At school, climate change was explored through various subjects, reflecting its multifaceted nature. Additionally, she gained insights into the systemic aspects of climate change through a Climate Fresk project organized by her teachers. This collaborative workshop, promoted by a French NGO, focused on the fundamental science behind climate change and empowered participants to take sustainable action. Anahit reflected: *“In fact, what the Climate Fresk shows us is that there is not one thing to blame, and everything is so tied. . . what is an effect can actually be the cause, shall we say. . .”*

While schools are a primary venue for learning about climate change, student engagement varies. Lidia (19), from the Black Sea region, illustrated this disparity. She noted that although her school extensively covered climate change and nature conservation, her classmates showed limited interest:

“In our civic education classes, we talk a lot about political, climate-related, and various issues. Our class focuses on biology and geography, and there are many related events and presentations. . . However, despite these efforts, we are left with about 10 out of 17 classmates. They are now more interested in other activities, like prom. . . I also don’t frequently seek out such information online because I mostly use my phone for gaming and chatting with friends”.

This reflects a broader trend where student interest in climate-related topics can be minimal despite the wealth of information available through both formal education and social media. For example, Izabela (15), from South Bulgaria, exemplified how engaging social media content can drive young people to take proactive steps toward environmental preservation. She recalled a YouTube video she watched at the age of seven that significantly influenced her actions. The video contrasted the state of the planet in 2017 with predictions for 2030, showing a stark deterioration. The emotional impact of this video prompted her and her peers to organize clean-up activities in their community, gathering garbage with bags and gloves. Izabela reflected: *“We were probably seven years old, crying when we watched this. After seeing the video, we gathered 20 children and collected a lot of plastic waste from the yard”.*

Young people’s extensive engagement with social media enables them to interact with influencers and form parasocial relationships, shaping their understanding of climate issues (Knupfer et al., 2023). Moreover, the wider web of activism challenges the dichotomy between the online and offline realms, reflecting a continuum of emotions related to climate change—such as eco-anxiety, grief, joy, and hope—across these spaces (Chiew et al., 2024; Bowman et al., 2023).

While participants generally reported exposure to internet content on planetary issues (such as ocean pollution, major wildfires, or the extinction of polar animals) and expressed concern about the effects of the climate crisis, only a few mentioned influencers as primary sources of information. For example, Emil (17), a foster care recipient, cited a famous Bulgarian influencer with over a million followers on YouTube as his main source of information on climate change and sustainable living: *“Well, a YouTuber, who is the most well-known YouTuber in Bulgaria, literally has over 1 million followers on YouTube; nobody else in Bulgaria has that much”.*

4.2.2. Hybrid Learning Through Urban and Rural Environmental Experiences

Previous studies have demonstrated that exposure to various environments, mobility backgrounds, and travel experiences play a critical role in shaping young people's environmental identities. The urban–rural divide significantly impacts lifestyle choices, including the way individuals relate to the natural world (Firinci Orman & Demiral, 2023). Most participants had experienced some form of mobility, whether moving between neighborhoods, cities, or counties, often from small towns to larger cities, or vice versa. They also reported engaging in touristic trips, both within and outside Bulgaria, further enriching their environmental awareness.

Participants' connections to natural environments were often mediated by semi-traditional lifestyles that emphasized consumption of locally sourced, culturally significant products. These ties were maintained through relationships with elderly relatives living in rural areas or local businesses, reflecting the interconnectedness of urban and rural experiences. This dynamic seemed to shape some participants' food consumption practices and fostered a closer relationship with nature and their communities, contributing to their environmental identities (Firinci Orman et al., n.d.).

Urban and rural environmental contexts appear to play a substantial role in the eco-literacy of young people. For instance, Daniel (15), who lives in a city, shared how he regularly visited his family's village, where he enjoyed boating on dams and gardening with his father. He also mentioned purchasing eggs and milk from local villagers. Despite his active urban lifestyle, which included sports activities and trips to natural sites, Daniel expressed skepticism about the city's waste management practices. He was particularly concerned about how waste, initially sorted into separate recycling bins, seemed to end up being mixed together after collection, reducing the perceived effectiveness of his environmental efforts:

"I saw them all come together. . . How should they be divided, collecting them in one place? I don't know, maybe they have some other way of sorting them after that, but. . . A little bit of meaning is lost from being in three different places; I don't see any sense in it. Yeah, what's the point if they're going to put them together later?"

Mihail (12) provided a contrasting perspective from the rural life environment, having moved from a city in northern Bulgaria to a nearby village. He described his village environment as cleaner, more pleasant, and more natural than the city, where he enjoyed walking in the groves, albeit with some fear of snakes. Mihail's understanding of the climate crisis stemmed primarily from videos on Instagram and other social media platforms, despite his rural lifestyle, which included helping his mother and grandmother with gardening and spending time with his cousins. Although his online activities were heavily influenced by K-Pop culture, he remained concerned about environmental issues, especially after watching videos about plastic pollution and the melting ice in Antarctica:

"I don't like it when people pollute. . . When the ice melts. . . Antarctica may soon melt. The animals there may no longer live. Also, if Antarctica melts, something terrible could happen to the entire planet".

Though the experiences of participants like Daniel and Mihail are unique, some commonalities emerged across the sample. Nearly half of the participants mentioned that their family's consumption practices involved locally sourced products from rural areas, reflecting a conscious effort toward environmental preservation. Similarly, many participants had direct familial connections to rural areas, often visiting elderly relatives living in the countryside. Additionally, a few participants mentioned spending holidays in natural settings within Bulgaria, such as mountains and rivers, reinforcing their connection to nature.

Interestingly, a similar trend appeared regarding fashion consumption. While five participants reported buying fast fashion brands or shopping on affordable online platforms like Shein, only two mentioned buying second-hand clothing or exchanging clothes with relatives. This pattern may be influenced by purchasing power, but it highlights the hybrid nature of young people's environmental practices in Bulgaria, where connections to nature and urban consumer habits coexist.

When discussing sustainability issues, participants frequently raised concerns about waste management, especially in larger cities. Another recurring theme was the impact of urban development, particularly the ongoing construction of new residential areas driven by internal migration. These factors illustrate the hybrid spatial experiences of young people in Bulgaria, who, despite living in a developing country, maintain close ties to both nature and modern urban lifestyles.

5. Conclusions

This research addresses the biases in the existing literature, which often prioritizes Global North contexts and focuses primarily on public climate activism, frequently overlooking the experiences of marginalized youth from underprivileged regions (Neas et al., 2022; Karsgaard & Shultz, 2022). Given the limited literature on activism in post-communist countries, this study contributes to understanding youth activism in these contexts by examining how young people perform environmental engagement in their everyday lives. By centering on the environmental identities, political participation, and eco-literacy of Bulgarian youth, it enhances the growing field of everyday climate change activism. This study highlights how these young individuals perform their environmental identities within the unique framework of a post-communist welfare regime, living in a developing economy that is deeply embedded in consumer culture while grappling with global climate challenges.

By examining their lived citizenship (Kallio, 2018; Kallio et al., 2020; Firinci Orman & Demiral, 2023) and often-overlooked forms of activism (Firinci Orman, 2022, 2023), this research shows that environmental engagement among young Bulgarians is far from uniform. Their motivations, aspirations, and understandings of environmental responsibility vary widely. Through an in-depth analysis of geo-social data through performative citizenship lenses, this study demonstrates that young people's everyday activism is intricately linked to their eco-literacy levels and political participation modes, reflecting their environmental awareness, pro-environmental attitudes, advocacy, activism, and sustainable behaviors. These actions are frequently tied to their consumer habits and their responses to the climate crisis.

The findings further reveal that young people's environmental citizenship and activism are learned and enacted in liminal spaces—where the boundaries between online–offline and urban–rural contexts blur—shaping their political positioning and performative identities. This blurring of contexts influences how they navigate their identities as environmental subjects, both as consumers and as stewards of the environment.

Moreover, this study underscores the structural inequalities facing young people in Bulgaria, such as the high costs of climate protection, inadequate municipal services, poor infrastructure, and insufficient waste management, all of which disadvantage the country's ability to address environmental challenges (Drieschova, 2024). As a post-communist nation, Bulgaria confronts challenges distinct from those in Western democracies and wealthier countries. For instance, young Bulgarians appear to be less impacted by the “Greta effect” or the protest-oriented discourse often seen in social media activism (see Mede & Schroeder, 2024). This presents an interesting area for further research. Nevertheless, the majority of participants reported learning about climate change predominantly through

social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, followed by traditional education channels, suggesting that the internet and digital content function as informal public pedagogy (see Firinci Orman, 2024).

Significantly, regardless of how young people expressed their environmental identities, most displayed care for the environment, engaging in small but meaningful everyday actions. This resonates with global studies, such as Hickman et al. (2021), which found that most young people feel anxious, powerless, and emotionally affected by climate change, with half experiencing feelings of sadness, anger, and guilt. In contrast, traditional educational frameworks often overlook the diverse modes of youth participation and the ways in which young people perform their environmental citizenship, including everyday activism, regardless of their involvement in formal structures or climate movements (Kettunen, 2021). Educators should address this gap by supporting young people's efforts through meaningful learning environments that draw on socio-spatial realities and lived experiences (Firinci Orman, 2024, 2025). By fostering a collective sense of everyday activism and recognizing individual contributions through their eco-literate worldviews, education can help scale personal actions into broader social change.

While the small sample size of this study limits the generalizability of its findings, its inclusion of diverse participants from various ethnic, class, mobility, and religious backgrounds offers valuable insights into the environmental identities of young people in Bulgaria. By amplifying the voices of marginalized youth, this research sheds light on their agency and underscores the significance of localized, everyday forms of activism. Though not always visible on the global stage, these actions are vital in terms of responding to environmental challenges in underexplored regions.

The implications of this study's results extend beyond the Bulgarian context, highlighting the value of the performative framework in researching underexplored settings. This approach, combined with the bottom-up exploration enabled by the geo-social methodology, provides in-depth, rich data on young people's lived experiences, particularly their everyday climate activism performances and eco-literate worldviews. This is especially relevant for studying youth in non-wealthy societies, where activism often unfolds in less formal and less visible ways. While Bulgaria's context possibly differs in many ways from that of other Eastern European youth, this study also offers insights into how liminal spaces—shaped by the transitional state of both youth and the post-communist society—mirror and influence young people's political positioning. These results pave the way for future research into how youth in similar contexts navigate their environmental identities and agency.

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Essay

Research-as-Solidarity, with Youth Leading the Way

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Abstract

Through the lens of youth engaged in the grassroots network Research for the Front Lines (R4FL) in Turtle Island, this essay explores how youth use research as a form of solidarity with marginalized communities in the context of escalating crises, ranging from climate change to systemic inequities. R4FL supports Indigenous, Black, and marginalized groups facing disproportionate impacts from environmental and climate changes. Drawing on the experiences of a diverse group of youth researchers, we examine the barriers posed by traditional academic structures and advocate for a research paradigm that prioritizes community needs, transparency, and accountability. Our discussions highlight how youth leverage our knowledge and research skills in service of social justice and environmental equity.

Keywords: youth; research; activism; Indigenous solidarity; climate justice; higher education

1. Introduction

Mounting crises demand radical and new approaches to research. Youth are especially experiencing greater instability due to compounding crises, including the climate crisis (Kaḥwak et al., 2024). These crises are rooted in the legacy and institutionalization of Western and colonial social structures (Sultana, 2022). To many of us, our activist lives and our research lives can feel very separate. Taking classes and doing academic research, as co-author Jaimie Vincent put it, “can [feel] draining, futile, and meaningless given the urgency of the societal changes needed to address the climate crisis”. As youth, we recognize that the crises we are experiencing and the monopolization of knowledge production by Western colonial constructs are interconnected (Wynter, 2003). Through research-as-solidarity (RS), we conduct research to support communities and movements leading transformative efforts on the ground, both confronting these crises and developing research

practices accountable to marginalized communities most impacted by Western hegemonic control over knowledge production.

This essay examines how youth volunteers with Research for the Front Lines (R4FL) explore research-as-solidarity. R4FL is a grassroots network based in Turtle Island, or “so-called Canada”, a term used by decolonial activists and Indigenous communities to reject the settler-colonial nation-making histories of “Canada” (see Lindamood, 2023). R4FL supports the research needs of Indigenous and other impacted communities and movements fighting for environmental and climate justice. We serve Indigenous, Black, racialized, and economically marginalized peoples, who are disproportionately impacted by climate change, as well as the systems and industries causing it. While these communities are on the frontlines of compounding crises, the research resources remain limited and are often directed toward academic interests rather than addressing urgent community needs (Pulido, 2008).

R4FL offers various forms of support, including funding for community research expenses and volunteer research labor. Projects begin when frontline communities request support. Research requests are managed by coordinators, who disseminate them to a network of almost 300 researchers from universities across Canada, including undergraduate students, graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and professors with diverse qualitative and quantitative skills. R4FL has made it a priority to support youth activist researchers by providing opportunities to build their skills, including online training sessions, project mentorship, and flexible time commitments. This model supports youth to grow as researchers and builds a pool of potential life-long solidarity researchers. Working independently of any university, R4FL members leverage academic tools and resources to support community-driven movements fighting against colonial capitalism, while building and defending alternatives.

In this essay, we build on scholarship critiquing the fallacy of objective science and argue that research-as-solidarity enables youth to confront compounding crises while challenging dominant research norms. Unlike participatory research, which often remains researcher-guided, or individual activism, which centers personal agency, RS shifts authority to frontline communities and social movements. Researchers serve as skilled volunteers, contributing expertise without claiming ownership or authority. These communities set research objectives and methodologies, shape the interpretation and dissemination of findings, and retain intellectual property rights. By centering accountable and reflexive relationships over conventional academic hierarchies, RS challenges the dominance of Western colonial research paradigms that detach scientific inquiry from social context, instead advancing a research model grounded in lived experience and relational accountability.

What Other Scholars Have to Say

Scholars have critically examined the colonial and capitalist domination of academic research, as well as ways in which research can function as a tool for resistance. Luchies (2015), for example, emphasizes how capitalist liberalism hinders the implementation of social justice and shapes academic norms that marginalize engaged research on social movements. Luchies instead advocates for research ethics that resist these dynamics—ethics that challenge the extractive imperatives of historically rooted truth-making, oppose its neutral and disengaged tendencies, and reject its hierarchical and exclusionary mode of authority. Similarly, Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) show how traditional research methodologies have often reproduced colonization by exploiting, marginalizing, and objectifying the knowledge, cultures, and experiences of Indigenous peoples. Decolonial researchers advocate for numerous practices to counter these historical injustices in research, centering a critique of Western research paradigms and decolonizing research practices

through approaches grounded in critical reflexivity, reciprocity, and transformational praxis, among others. They advocate for a recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems and the use of research as an instrument for resistance and empowerment.

The concepts of resistance and empowerment are central to decolonial counter-hegemonic research, which at its core questions knowledge production by questioning “who is entitled to create meanings about the world; how some meanings and not others are accorded the status of knowledge”, and how this unfolds along identity lines (Strega & Brown, 2015, p. 1). These approaches seek to address what Haraway has called the “god trick”, where knowledge is produced from an eye that sees “everything from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581). Liboiron’s work is instructive in how to not be “unattached” and “unaccountable” in research (Liboiron, 2021, p. 52). Liboiron, alongside other decolonial scholars such as Kim TallBear, encourages conducting research while maintaining “good relation” (Liboiron, 2021, p. 25). This orientation foregrounds the importance of being able to trace power and violent relations to mobilize such knowledge to hold colonial–capitalist entities accountable. Similarly, the scholarship on research supporting social movements for socio-ecological justice underscores the necessity for researchers to be engaged in a reflexive process that is accountable to these movements (Bevington & Dixon, 2005).

Recent studies have explored the intersections between youth activism, colonialism, and capitalism, highlighting themes such as intergenerational solidarity, decolonial research practices, the influence of neoliberal governmentality on youth participation in activism, and how youth challenge human rights frameworks in neoliberal colonial states (Goessling, 2017; Lam & Trott, 2024; Lee & Allweiss, 2023). However, while we acknowledge the important work on why and how to hold colonial and capitalist entities accountable and youth activism, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the perspective of young people from diverse backgrounds and positions. Specifically, there is limited research on how youth reflect on research-as-solidarity and how practices of resistance, empowerment, and accountability can be developed to better serve marginalized communities impacted by the production of Western hegemonic knowledge.

2. How We Approached This Collective, Youth-Led Essay

This essay is co-authored by 13 people involved with R4FL. Twelve of us are youth (under 35 years old). One of us is middle-aged, the founder of R4FL, who supported the co-authoring process but did not provide content for this essay. We are Indigenous researchers, researchers of color, and White settlers who dedicate time to supporting frontline communities’ research needs.

This essay is a result of a collective reflexive praxis (England, 1994; Rose, 1997). Through structured dialogue and collective reflection, we engaged in conscious reflexivity (England, 1994) and critically examined how our individual positionalities and systems of oppression have shaped our understanding and practice of research-as-solidarity.

The structured dialogical process (Madison, 2005) took place in November of 2024. We shared our reflections and insights on six key questions, which we co-developed beforehand:

- In what ways are each of us, and other youth, engaging in research as a form of activism and/or solidarity? What can this form of activism be like?
- Why are we engaging in research as a form of activism and/or solidarity?
- What can research-as-activism do/accomplish/make happen? To what ends are we doing this?
- How can we do this well?
- What is the specific role of youth in redefining and reshaping what research is? What/who is this research for?

- Are there barriers to youth engaging in research as a form of activism? If so, what are they, and how might they be addressed?

Our methodological approach ensured reflexive praxis through multiple stages: individual written reflection, collective dialogue, and collaborative writing. This multimodal process allowed us to consider how our training in academic institutions and varied positionalities influenced our approach to solidarity research. We especially prioritized Indigenous and racialized perspectives to shape our collective understanding. Following Rose's (1997) framework for reflexive praxis, we engaged in both inward reflection on researcher identity and an outward analysis of power relations in research. This is reflected in our decision to foreground co-authors' perspectives throughout the text through direct quotes, including our names. We do this to connect each of our contributions in this essay with our respective perspectives as youth from diverse backgrounds and positionalities.

Following data collection, which consisted of individual written responses and a transcript of the collective dialogue, the first author cleaned the transcript and immersed herself in the data. She developed initial codes by iteratively going through the data and identifying important concepts as per reflexive thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2021). A thematic analysis is a broad term for analyzing qualitative data but the first author used an inductive process within an interpretive paradigmatic framework, which was informed by her position as an R4FL researcher and a graduate student in science and technology studies (STS). The first author then identified themes that were further refined in small teams through a collaborative writing process that reflected on the collective discussion and individual reflexive experience. Such an approach allowed for interpretations that remained faithful to the discussants' perspectives while enabling reflexive engagement with the data.

3. Research as Interested Activity: Towards a Relationship-Centric View

Conventional research presents many problems, including but not limited to its tendency to operate in ways that reinforce capitalist, extractivist, and hegemonic power (Liboiron, 2021). It tends to favor detached methodologies that prioritize contributions to a body of knowledge over driving transformative change, all while failing to remain accountable to the communities it affects (Tuck & Yang, 2014). As a result, youth research activists are increasingly turning to solidarity research as a pathway to address the compounding crises we face (Gobby, 2020). Approaches such as that which R4FL propose for conducting research and reimagining the role of the researcher arise from deep feelings of discontent and frustration within traditional research spaces. In this section, we highlight the irreconcilable tensions that we, as youth research activists, have identified concerning the conventional research approaches. We then discuss how we are engaging in solidarity research as a counter-response.

3.1. Researchers and Their Subjects

Many of us use our academic training when we contribute to research for R4FL, although the academy often maintains a positivist perspective that science and research are objective and neutral endeavors that are distinct from interested activities such as activism. For example, Sarah Marquis observed an intentional and reinforced division between "doing science" and "doing activism" in her interdisciplinary department. In her program, there was "a lot of pushback against activism and academics and science being grouped together, there was a lot of pushback against activist science in general". Sarah attributed this resistance to the department's strong belief in "the idea that science had to be objective and unbiased". For Sarah research-as-solidarity became "a form of resistance to [...] traditional academic ideas of what is good science". She explains, "I'm frustrated

with [the] idea that all science has to be this pure space [where] you're not thinking about the political and economic context". Much research in the academy, especially in scientific disciplines, is validated through claims of objectivity. However, feminist and Indigenous scholars in STS have long contested these claims of scientific objectivity, arguing that they obscure the social origins of scientific knowledge production (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Latour, 1987; Liboiron, 2021). The academy, as an institution of power, determines what counts as valid knowledge not through intrinsic truth but through power relations that privilege certain forms of knowledge while delegitimizing others (Foucault, 1980).

Many of us have first-hand experience of the discrediting of critical research approaches. Katherine Robitaille recalls an emblematic experience,

"I [have been] personally told that, because I adopt a critical perspective, I am pedantic and tautological, sometimes in front of hundreds of people. These are heavy, symbolically violent, and overly complex words, used solely to discredit these approaches. This criticism ignores the fact that feminist, post-colonial, decolonial, Indigenous, and anti-racist approaches, among others, have a long history of research and knowledge, not only in academic literature but also in society."

Yet as youth experiencing compounding crises, we are driven to conduct research that responds directly to the needs we witness in our communities and approach inquiry through relationships of care and responsibility rather than detached observation. As Sadie Quinn observes, traditional academia often produces research that is constrained in its applicability, and "isolated from the outside world [. . .]. Classic academic research does not have an immediate impact towards creating the change I want to see in the world". Instead, it aims primarily to contribute to the existing academic literature rather than drive real-world transformation. Though academic research has its own merits, R4FL researchers seek to contribute to research that directly supports grassroots fights led by frontline communities. Still, the abstract organizing principle of academic research raises important questions about the purpose of research, who ultimately benefits from it, and how it is funded.

3.2. Research and Its Social Context

Drawing on her background in STEM research, Jaimie highlights how even what is construed as "objective and neutral" scientific research—often upheld as the "ultimate truth of everything"—is shaped by "external factors that influence how [research] is funded and interpreted". By tracing private sector influences within universities (Hiltner et al., 2024; Morris & Jacquet, 2024), reflects Jensine Raihan, it becomes clear how research is done to "entrench their power". In this same line of thought, Katherine highlights that much of conventional academic research processes and outputs contribute to sustaining "systems of oppression, (re)producing power relations and inequalities", thereby hindering social transformation (McHugh, 2014). Indeed, scientific research funding follows political priorities (Lave, 2012; Mirowski, 2011; Blume, 1984; Hess, 2016; Levins & Lewontin, 1985). While scholars have established that even seemingly objective sciences such as physics depend on socially determined paradigms and political priorities (Kuhn, 1962; Keller, 1985; Barad, 2007), such investigations are still recognized as legitimate science and indeed produce reliable knowledge about the world. Still, they remain, as Harding (1991) argues, inherently *interested* research activities. The conventional research approaches rarely critically examine how their inquiries are shaped by political priorities and social norms, thereby obscuring their relationships with power and structures of oppression.

3.3. *Researcher Subjectivity and Responsibility*

Conventional academic research often fosters a researcher subjectivity oriented more toward funding interests and personal curiosity than toward addressing community needs. Sadie described this as an unsettling feeling that comes with doing research: “[M]aybe this is interesting to me, but I don’t know if I’m actually doing anything to help the world in any real way”. Conventional academic research can carry the expectation of being conducted at arm’s length, detached from practical or immediate applications. With mounting crises around us, this approach can feel deeply unfulfilling. Jaimie recounted the frustration of working on a particular research project and realizing that it would not be immediately relevant to anyone beyond the academy: “I was like, ‘What do you mean there’s nobody that’s going to use this right now?!’ I was trying to find people that I could share it with, and people that would care about it and could use it. And I was like, what am I doing?” At that time, she began to critically evaluate what doing research meant to her. While conventional research approaches promote a researcher subjectivity that is individualist and interested in pursuing unaccountable, personal curiosities, research-as-solidarity promotes a relational subjectivity, contending with one’s impact and engaged in the society one inhabits.

At the heart of this tension is how conventional research implicates and impacts communities while research processes and deliverables often fail to foster meaningful connections, relationships, and, importantly, accountability to those communities (Strega & Brown, 2015). Jensine underscores this dynamic by reflecting on the tension they experienced entering graduate school as a community organizer. As an organizer, Jensine emphasized, “you do everything because of your accountability, your relationship to your membership in the organization”. However, once in graduate school, Jensine noticed a stark inversion: “you are the researcher, so you are driving everything [. . .] it didn’t really feel like you were really accountable to anybody”. This lack of accountability deeply troubled Jensine: “given institutional implications that research has, there are epistemic, hegemonic powers that particular research has in the ways in which we organize institutions, develop policy, organize education, organize knowledge production. All of this has huge implications”. Despite the potentially far-reaching impacts of research, Jensine lamented that “it’s not accountable to people that it’s affecting”.

In response to the problems with traditional research, youth are engaging in research-as-solidarity. Given the unequal power dynamics within academic institutions that persist in the backdrop of activist research, and youth activism in academia more broadly (Richter et al., 2020), we emphasize the importance of transparency in the research process. Thus, solidarity research must be accountable to the communities it serves. Mary Stuart argues that though RS can be critiqued for lacking objectivity, it in fact “just makes its biases and . . . positionality quite clear in a way that [conventional] research often doesn’t. And so in that sense, it can be a lot more transparent”. In other words, it is precisely RS’s lack of “objectivity” and recognition of this impossibility that makes it more honest and accountable to the communities it serves.

The transformation in how we understand research encompasses both purpose and process; frontline communities determine research goals while the practice itself embodies principles of solidarity. As youth solidarity researchers, we challenge conventional research models that fail to prioritize accountability and relevance beyond the academy. Solidarity research offers a relationship-centric approach that recognizes the inherently social nature of all research endeavors.

4. Components of Research-as-Solidarity: Community-Directed Research and Researcher Relations

While many forms of community-oriented research approaches exist, participatory methods such as community-based participatory research and youth participatory action research feature most prominently in the literature (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010; Ozer, 2017). These approaches, however, still preserve the central role of the researcher in leading research inquiries. Research-as-solidarity, in contrast, fundamentally shifts this dynamic by placing frontline communities and social movements in control of research entirely while researchers maintain accountable relationships with these communities.

4.1. From Community-Engaged to Community-Led Research

Many of us organize our academic research to advance frontline communities' interests, similar to participatory approaches. Mary's master's research at the University of Victoria examines anti-climate organizing "to support movements for social-ecological justice in better understanding how counter-movements operate". Similarly, Katherine advocates for research approaches where the people most impacted by challenges are involved throughout the process, emphasizing collaborative knowledge development, reflexivity, and actionable outcomes tailored to specific community contexts.

While these approaches align research with community needs, RS goes further by conducting research under complete community direction based on grassroots fights. For instance, Sarah reflects on community-led investigations on polluting corporations that many of us are involved in:

"[This investigative work is] a way to unveil corporate power and draw attention to it. That feels like important activism—unveiling corporate practices so that communities that are being marginalized by these corporations can fight back against them. And I think that there's a lot of science in academia that entrench [corporate] power, or science done in the private sector that's used to entrench [corporate] power. And so I think this is an underused form of activism, uncovering these things can then lead to change."

R4FL's support of land defender Molly Murphy's research to investigate the RCMP's Community-Industry Response Group (C-IRG) exemplifies RS in practice. Led by frontline needs and direction, this research used a combination of access to information requests, interviews, and document analyses to expose state mechanisms of resource extraction enforcement (Murphy & Research for the Front Lines, 2021, 2022, 2024). Three articles were published based on this research, the first of which explained that nearly \$19 million in taxpayer funds were spent between 2018 and 2021 solely on enforcing one company's injunction against Wet'suwet'en land defenders. (Wet'suwet'en land defenders have been occupying their traditional territories in efforts to stop Coastal GasLink's pipeline construction). The research documented specific C-IRG tactics such as "stimming"—using noise and light to psychologically distress protesters—and exposed how C-IRG training reproduces colonial narratives by framing Indigenous land defenders as "professional protesters" funded by U.S. corporations. This research also made clear the links between police violence and climate injustice. One of the articles, entitled *Real Climate Action Means Defunding the Police*, argued that:

"Environmentalists need to connect the dots between the climate crisis and the policing of land defense—and begin fighting to defund and dismantle policing organizations like the C-IRG. Without police enforcement and the injunction system, many of these fossil fuel extraction and transportation projects, dams, mines, and old-growth logging projects would simply not happen. What we have in Canada is a government-sanctioned, unaccountable armed force dedicated to

enforcing climate collapse. With a portion of each and every Canadian tax dollar, the Canadian government has been bankrolling climate disaster, as well as the continued genocide of Indigenous communities". (Murphy & Research for the Front Lines, 2024)

By responding directly to frontline communities' need to understand the forces they face, this youth-supported research project made visible the relationships between state power, corporate interests, and environmental destruction while providing tactical knowledge for front line-led resistance movements. Although RS flips the power dynamics between researchers and frontline communities, the efficacy of this kind of research approach requires specific researcher praxis.

4.2. *Challenges and Principles of Solidarity Research Relations*

Fundamentally, research-as-solidarity requires decentering ourselves and following frontline direction. As R4FL researcher Jaimie says:

"I am part of a research team where the research question, methodology development, data gathering, analysis, dissemination, and everything else, including intellectual property, is decided by the movement that I am working with/for. . . . As a researcher who is doing research as a form of solidarity, it's very much about following the lead and contributing to the momentum that's already there, and just stepping in when I'm asked to do certain parts of the research. If you're a classic academic, you're the center of the research question, the research world, you're the boss. . . and everything revolves around what you want to do. [With RS] it's about contributing in ways that are needed and wanted. I am using the skills that I have to contribute to the momentum of the existing movements fighting for a more just world."

Since RS inverts conventional academic power dynamics, it requires continuous practice. Through collective reflection, we identified four key challenges in implementing solidarity research. First, researchers must be transparent about capacity and timelines, which often extend longer than initially anticipated due to limited resources and competing commitments. Second, researchers must honor our commitments as frontline communities depend on this work for our efforts on the ground.

These two challenges are particularly significant for graduate students, who make up most research volunteers in R4FL. They face enormous demands on their schedules and often cannot align this work to fulfill their program requirements. Moreover, common research needs such as corporate investigations require developing new skills, and even then, information can be difficult to find. This demands significant time that must be carefully managed.

Third, an important tension emerges as community members direct the research while managing urgent frontline work, requiring researchers to balance independent progress with accountability to community guidance. Fourth, RS demands different researcher subjectivities than traditional academic approaches; it requires attentive, reflexive, and accountable ways of working that prioritize relationship-building with frontline communities, co-researchers, and ourselves. These relationships need ongoing maintenance and reflection, creating both challenges and opportunities for meaningful solidarity work.

4.3. *The Importance of Research-as-Solidarity and Climate or Environmental Justice*

The work that we do as a collective takes on more vital importance when placed into conversation with ongoing questions of climate and environmental justice. Much ink has been spilled on the links between colonialism, racism, extractive industry, and anthropogenic climate change (Todd, 2017; Whyte, 2017; Sultana, 2022; O'Leary et al., 2023;

Estes, 2024), to say nothing of the very real lived experiences and impacts that Indigenous and other marginalized communities encounter daily. Our work with communities, therefore, often focuses on relationships between communities and lands, waters, and other environmental spaces in one way, shape, or form.

Returning to Liboiron (2021), anthropogenic environmental change can—and is often directly attributable to—‘bad’ relations with land. The same can be said about climate change (Whyte, 2017). One constant among the communities and movements we support is that they often seek to maintain or restore positive relations with the land. This informs the way that we pursue research-as-solidarity. We work to practice self-reflexivity in remembering that the folks we support, and their desired outcomes are at the heart of the work we do. We use our institutional privilege (which some of us possess more of than others) to work towards desirable climate and environmental futures for these collaborators, wherever and whenever we can. However, it is easy to use these terms in the abstract, and when the rubber hits the road, to speak colloquially, what does this mean? What does self-reflexivity look like in our work?

4.4. Reflexive Praxis Around Positionality

Taking leadership from frontline communities demands not just accountability but also reflexive praxis, critically examining both our privileged positions and the norms of knowledge production. Katherine shared her experiences with this process as a White settler:

“I ask myself a lot of questions about how I act. I’m constantly and actively asking myself how I can amplify the knowledge, struggles, and plural actions to combat the climate crisis, without taking over. I’m wondering how I can occupy the university space to burst or deconstruct this very rigid box [which] is wrongly considered to be [the] only way of creating knowledge, but also how to create space for the diversity of knowledge. I wonder how, from my position, I can contribute to repairing past and present injustices.”

Research-as-solidarity, and particularly reflexive praxis as exemplified by Katherine, provides an analytical and practical orientation that transcends conventional science’s limitations in examining how social contexts shape scientific observation (Harding, 1991; Latour & Woolgar, 1979). By recognizing the social context that produces both researchers and objects of investigation, reflexive praxis decenters colonial paradigms of knowledge production that obscure how our positionalities shape our concerns and observations and instead encourage unconventional and diverse forms of knowledge production.

This praxis also grapples with researchers’ social responsibility given our privileged access to academic resources. As Stephanie Eccles notes, “There’s a huge privilege that comes with being paid as a researcher. There’s a lot of resources that become available to you, and I think that it’s our responsibility to find ways to make them useful outside of the institution”. Katherine builds on this, arguing that “with great privilege comes great power, but also, and above all, great responsibility to do research that contributes to actively deconstructing systems of oppression and power relations”. Through reflexive praxis, we recognize our power to either reinforce or challenge structures of oppression, underscoring the importance of maintaining accountable relations with frontline communities in RS.

Reflexive praxis further supports us to more broadly reflect on how research tangibly serves frontline communities. Deondre Smiles, who is a citizen of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, demonstrates this reflective inquiry:

“The research that I do is always done in support of my own people. It’s actually one of the things I always ask myself before I do any kind of work at all in my job, which is, does my community support this? Would it support my community or a community that’s in need? I think that direct action is great, and I think there’s

a need for direct action. But there's also a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes, which I think that Research for the Front Lines is about—us doing the work in order to empower people that are out there on the ground doing the direct action.”

Research-as-solidarity enables youth researchers to reflexively engage with our social responsibility to the planet and historically marginalized communities. By placing frontline movements in control of research and demanding reflexive, accountable practices from researchers, RS offers an approach fundamentally distinct from conventional academic training.

5. The Academy: Fundamental Barrier to Research-as-Solidarity

5.1. Restricted Access

While RS offers an important way for young people to engage with communities and respond to the compounding crises we experience, there are also institutional barriers to doing this kind of research. Participating in this form of solidarity requires access to research skills, which poses a barrier because these skills are often obtained through higher education. Melissa Spiridigliozzi reinforced the importance of being affiliated with a university for success in solidarity research: “If I was not a student at Concordia, or if I had not been given the opportunities to hone skills and research, then I wouldn't be able to be a part of this form of activism”. There are also practical barriers to entering this university. As Sadie said, “it is cost-prohibitive for a lot of people” and “might not work for a variety of other accessibility reasons, including learning styles, neurodiversity, abilities, and disabilities”. Riwittika Banerjee also mentioned “academic language and jargon”, as well as paywalls, as factors that limit access to research produced in institutions of higher education.

5.2. Domination of Western, Colonial Constructs

Even if one does have the opportunity to gain research skills in a university setting, Western academic institutions train their students in a way that may not be compatible with the ways of knowing valued by frontline communities, especially Indigenous communities. Melissa highlighted this, stating that “ways of knowing and seeking knowledge, and what is knowledge, [have] been largely approached through predominantly Western-centric and colonial models”. In a similar sense, Annie McQuarrie stressed that Western scientific academia often excludes valuable knowledge systems, such as Indigenous perspectives and practices, that can help transform society. Indeed, Katherine added that “conventional academic research is colonial, capitalist, extractivist, and hierarchical, while so many other forms of knowledge and research exist and are much more in phase with taking care of ourselves, taking care of the territory, supporting ourselves collectively to face multiple crises”. Jensine explains that this colonial system makes it difficult to “recognize and promote Indigenous knowledge production” and conduct research “in a way that honors the [...] requests and demands of these communities”.

Deondre also discussed the tokenism and resistance that can occur in universities when it comes to embodying principles related to solidarity research:

“I'm the only Indigenous person in my department, and I'm told to teach about decolonization and Indigenization. But yet, when it comes down to actually embodying these things, I'm always getting my hands slapped and told, 'No, you can't do that. No, this isn't right. This makes us look bad'. Maybe you should worry about looking bad when you're doing retaliatory things against your Indigenous faculty or trying to harm students.”

5.3. Structural Constraints in Participation

Besides their emphasis on Western modes of knowledge production, the structure of academic institutions discourages RS. Sarah mentioned constraints including the “academic pressures to build a reputation, author papers, and spend all your time working on projects that will be visible on your resume”, as opposed to ones that help frontline communities. Mary discussed the particular pressures affecting youth: “While established academics can (and need to) establish long term partnerships with Indigenous groups and other communities, students are on a short time frame dependent on resources”. Jaimie reflected on the challenges within STEM fields specifically, where external influences, including political goals, are seen as conflicting with the objectivity of the research. Because of this assumption, Jaimie explained, there are very few networks of STEM researchers involved in RS, meaning many youth do not have a clear picture of what it might mean to be a scientist-activist. Jaimie stated that we need to “broaden the scope of what it means to be a STEM researcher in different contexts, especially knowing that the majority of graduates will not pursue academia”.

Thus, RS remains challenging for youth because of barriers to and within institutions of higher education, which are built on Western-centric knowledge production. As such, they often do not hold space, deliberately or structurally, for research based on non-Western ways of knowing and solidarity praxis.

6. Our Final Thoughts

Youth today face compounding crises, from economic instability to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and climate change. In response, they are interrogating social structures and institutions, including academia, that are founded upon dominant colonial-capitalist ideologies. Traditional scholarship and science, rooted in White supremacy (Tate & Page, 2018), provide inadequate mechanisms to address the needs of frontline and marginalized communities.

R4FL offers youth a space to practice scholarship in solidarity with frontline communities, operating outside academia while leveraging academic skills in service to Indigenous, Black, racialized, and economically marginalized communities. While community-oriented research has emerged in academic spaces (Strand et al., 2003), R4FL’s research-as-solidarity is distinct; frontline communities and social movements direct research that advances their social transformation work and researchers take on supportive roles. RS relies primarily on volunteer labor, avoiding complex funding mechanisms. Additionally, Mary notes that since R4FL’s RS resides outside the academy, it avoids the “tensions and disconnects between academic demands and timelines versus on-the-ground timelines”. These factors, combined with the dominance of conventional research approaches in academia incoherent with principles of solidarity, position R4FL advantageously to organize RS.

As youth, we see research as a tool to advance community resistance to the crises we are collectively facing. By engaging in solidarity research, we embrace the inherently political nature of knowledge production. Academia provides significant privilege and access to substantial resources; researchers have the responsibility to ensure these resources are leveraged to create meaningful impacts beyond the confines of the institutions, especially considering the role of hegemonic knowledge production in reinforcing systems of oppression. Moreover, as Melissa notes, traditional academic approaches often reduce community engagement to surface-level consultation. In contrast, frontline communities in RS direct and own all aspects of the research process. Importantly, the principles of accountability, transparency, and reflexivity guide relationships between frontline communities and researchers to support this critical approach.

We see RS as crucial to resisting dominant research paradigms and addressing contemporary crises. As Jaimie said, “It is for our future. We [youth] will live the majority of our lives in the climate chaos caused by the previous generations. We have a real stake/skin in the game when it comes to the societal changes we need to happen”. However, youth need more support to engage in solidarity research. Economic constraints make volunteer work challenging, and they require training and mentorship that organizations such as R4FL can provide. Youth also need empowerment beyond what the academy offers, where, as Mary observes, “it’s easiest to go along with the status quo and it can be very difficult to break away from”. We view our work as directly tied to pursuing climate justice with our collaborators, as ultimately, anthropogenic change will affect us all; it does not respect national boundaries or societal positions. Conversely, climate justice will benefit us all—the ultimate intrinsic reward for doing good work.

This collaborative reflexive essay offers a critical perspective on conventional academic research traditions, enumerating their inadequacy in addressing overlapping crises. Research-as-solidarity provides a mechanism for conducting research that is led by those most impacted by ongoing crises and their social movements. RS supports frontline communities in their resistance to hegemonic power structures while challenging conventional knowledge production. Through RS, youth can respond meaningfully to the crises we experience and practice research that honor our responsibilities to Indigenous communities and social justice movements—opportunities traditional academia struggles to provide.

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Article

Experiencing Climate Change and Living Through It—Provocations for Education Based on South African Youth Experiences of Climate Change Policymaking and Politics

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Abstract

This research investigates youth participation in climate change politics and policymaking in South Africa, responding to a notable lack of Global South-facing studies in the literature on youth climate activism. Guided by our lead author's substantial engagement in South Africa's youth climate movement from 2014–2024 and drawing upon semi-structured interviews with 12 young climate activists, we offer rich insights into young South Africans' motivations to participate in climate politics and policymaking. We then draw upon these insights to offer a series of provocations for climate change education. On investigating why youth participate, we find that although they report similar intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for participation to their Global North counterparts, South African youth climate activists place far greater emphasis on situated awareness and lived experience. We further improve the understanding of how young people perceive meaningful participation and climate (in)justices and how this shapes and is shaped by their activism. We therefore emphasise the value of incorporating both local case studies and affective elements in climate change pedagogies to encourage participation in collective climate action. Ultimately, we call for an enhanced recognition and inclusion of youth as active contributors to, and educators within, climate change governance and for the reconceptualization of youth climate activism, and policy engagement as key sites of transformative learning.

Keywords: youth climate activism; climate change education; youth participation; motivations for activism; intersectionality; transformation-oriented learning; South Africa

1. Introduction

The greatest challenges facing present and future generations are the interlinked planetary crises of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution (UNFCCC, 2022). As a multi-scale, multi-level and multi-actor problem, climate change governance is incredibly complex (Jänicke, 2017) with impacts and vulnerabilities extending over space and time. This raises important questions of equity and justice which, along with the limited technical and financial capacities of governments (state actors) warrants alternative governance mechanisms (Page, 2006; Hickman, 2016) including a greater inclusion of non-state and sub-state actors (Acuto, 2010; Andonova et al., 2009; Gordon & Johnson, 2017; Keck & Sikkink, 1999).

Young people are an important yet often overlooked sub-grouping of non-state actors (NSAs) in climate change governance. Despite often having limited physical resources,

young people bring new capacities, innovative ways of thinking, and alternative approaches to organising, which can enrich climate governance. Much of the literature on youth in climate change governance focuses on the role and experiences of young NSAs in the Global North and within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), with limited attention to the Global South (Andersson, 2017; Beukes, 2021; Bowman, 2019; Elsen & Ord, 2021; Nkrumah, 2020). Their visibility within the UNFCCC and beyond remains limited despite a recent, substantial expansion in the global mobilisation of youth-led climate activism (Della Porta & Portos, 2023; de Moor et al., 2021; Han & Ahn, 2020; Islam, 2023; Yona et al., 2020).

Youth participation in climate change policymaking and politics is often motivated by perspectives of climate (in)justice (Kotzé & Knappe, 2023; Morgan et al., 2023) with youth claims of intra- and intergenerational justice identified by several scholars (Aiello & Di Martino, 2024; García-Antúnez et al., 2023; Ursin et al., 2021). Regardless, youth still receive less attention than the experiences of other NSAs, a gap which is even more pronounced at national and sub-national levels (Luckett, 2022; O'Brien et al., 2018; Thew, 2018; Thew et al., 2020; Vogel et al., 2022). Resultantly, there is limited understanding of what effective and meaningful youth participation in climate change governance looks like in climate policy, further exacerbating the potential for intergenerational injustice (Kosciulek, 2020).

South Africa presents an interesting case: the South African Constitution and Bill of Rights explicitly state that all citizens have the right “to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being” and “to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations” (The South African Constitution, 1996, p. 9). Despite this, the country remains the second most unequal country in the world, the largest carbon emitter in Africa, and the 14th largest globally (Carbon Brief, 2018; Chersich & Wright, 2019). Climate change is set to deepen inequalities and vulnerabilities running across socioeconomic, racial, and gender lines. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report indicates that climate impacts for Southern Africa include periods of increased and decreased rainfall leading to floods and droughts, an increased risk of tropical cyclones, and consequential food and health insecurity (Trisos et al., 2022). Tackling pre-existing inequalities is thus a necessary precursor for preventing further climate-related injustice (Chersich et al., 2018; Tanner et al., 2022).

1.1. Research Questions and Main Contributions

This research investigates youth climate activism in South Africa, exploring the participation of young people in national and sub-national climate policy and political processes to address the following research question:

What motivates youth climate activism at the national and sub-national levels in South Africa?

We contribute to the research on youth climate activism in several ways:

(1) We expand the empirical literature to address the geographical gap pertaining to African experiences specifically and Global South experiences more broadly. (2) We address the methodological gap by contributing rich qualitative data which interrogates youth-led participation spanning a range of different youth organisations and opportunities rather than focusing on one network or policy forum. (3) We apply, analyse, and visually depict a series of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to increase the understanding of why young people participate in climate policy and politics. (4) We improve the understanding of how young people in the South African context perceive climate related (in)justices and how this shapes and is shaped by their activism. (5) We expand on existing work on the links between participation in policymaking and activism and transformative learning and its implications for climate change education. Underpinning each of these contributions is our

emphasis on young people's agency and their relevance as central stakeholders in climate governance who are already experiencing and responding to a climate-changed world.

1.2. Defining Youth in the South African Context

This study follows the South African National Youth Policy (NYP) in defining youth as 14 to 34 years (Department of Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities, 2020). Persons aged between 0 and 34 (children and youth) make up 64% of the population which means that, in addition to the burden they face as the generation who's expected life-spans overlap with medium to longer-term timescales of dangerous climate projections, they constitute the demographic most affected by climate change in South Africa (Beukes, 2021; Statistics South Africa, 2022). Notwithstanding the current social and environmental burdens facing young people, youth unemployment rates are much higher than the national average, with the 15–24 age range experiencing a 63.9% unemployment rate (Statistics South Africa, 2022). As the living generation that will be most affected by climate change with the least political power (Yona et al., 2020), young people deserve multiple seats at the decision-making table. In this study, we focus specifically on young people who strive to represent "youth" as an interest group in climate change policymaking and activism, i.e., emphasising the experiences, needs, and rights of their peers and of future generations, rather than those who may be young but participate as representatives of their government, employer, or another civil society interest group.

1.3. Understanding Youth Participation, Climate Change Governance, and Climate Justice

The literature on youth participation in climate change governance can be grouped into four distinct yet overlapping research agendas: studies of youth policy participation in the UNFCCC through the constituency of Youth NGOs (YOUNGO) (Kolleck & Schuster, 2022; Thew, 2018; Thew et al., 2020, 2021; Yona et al., 2020), studies of youth political participation in climate actions or protests outside of institutional decision-making settings (Bowman, 2019; de Moor et al., 2021; Nissen et al., 2020; Wahlström et al., 2019) and studies relating to climate and energy literacy and the role of pedagogy in effective youth engagement and mobilisation (Cutter-Mackenzie & Rousell, 2018; Gladwin et al., 2022; Karsgaard & Davidson, 2023; Komatsu et al., 2023; Kowasch et al., 2021; Rappleye et al., 2024; Svarstad, 2021). The fourth emerging body of literature studies climate litigation as a means for which young people can contribute to climate governance, often through a lens of intergenerational justice (Donger, 2022; Dozsa, 2023; Nkrumah, 2021b; Parker et al., 2022; Steinkamp, 2023). This present study sits within the youth participation literature related to education and the role of pedagogy in effective youth engagement and mobilisation.

This literature is limited by its reliance on quantitative methods which are ill equipped to capture the rich, complex, and heterogeneous experiences of youth climate participation. It is further limited by its focus on one youth network (i.e., FFF) and its limited geographic perspective which rarely expands beyond cities in the Global North (Neas et al., 2022). However, it highlights some useful conceptual tools, such as Kowasch et al.'s (2021) application of the psychological conceptualisation of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to youth climate activism, which this paper also utilises (Kowasch et al., 2021).

Clear links between participation, justice, and vulnerability are evident in the study of climate change governance. As the effects of climate change are distributed disproportionately and more strongly felt by those with pre-existing vulnerabilities, particularly in the Global South, proactive efforts to prioritise justice in climate change governance is required. This includes attention to historic responsibility and injustices as well as to the air distribution of benefits in the present and future (Dryzek et al., 2013; Gardiner, 2013). Another dimension to this argument is that actions of individuals or groups of people

in one part of the world affect people beyond national and temporal borders. Therefore, duties, obligations, and responsibilities constitute the concerns of international justice (Baer, 2011). Similarly, intergenerational justice links to the timescale of effects, and the fact that today's young generation and the future generations they will birth will experience the brunt of climate impacts (Ursin et al., 2021; Howarth, 2013).

Justice within the youth participation literature is considered from two angles: whether/how their participation results in procedural and representation justice, and the nature of youth justice claims (Fraser, 2014; Han & Ahn, 2020; Huttunen & Albrecht, 2021; Thew et al., 2020; Schlosberg, 2004; Scott & Malivel, 2021; Ursin et al., 2021). Within the International Youth Climate Movement (IYCM), youth protestors and activists have called for 'climate justice now' and 'systems change not climate change'. Their claims include both inter and intragenerational justice, as well as social justice as integral to climate justice (Conner et al., 2023; Cugnata et al., 2024; Han & Ahn, 2020; Pavenstädt, 2024; Ursin et al., 2021). Here, we investigate youth perceptions of (in)justice.

Mainstream ESD approaches have been critiqued for framing climate change as a purely scientific problem which limits proposed solutions to the technocratic (e.g., R. Khan, 2008; Muccione et al., 2025) and centres white, middle-class priorities such as biodiversity conservation above addressing socio-environmental injustices which disproportionately affect the working classes and people of colour (F. Khan, 2000).

Climate change activism as a form of experiential learning is argued to be a way to expose learners to alternative discourses which critique these technocratic and colonial framings while providing opportunities to challenge the status quo (Kowasch et al., 2021). Several scholars have suggested that climate change activism should therefore be considered as an integral part of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) which can build the capacity and confidence of young people to act as environmental citizens and contribute to transformative socio-ecological change and to advance climate justice (Kowasch et al., 2021; McGregor & Christie, 2021; Neas et al., 2022; Trott, 2024). There is some hesitation around this due to perceptions of violence associated with activism; however, a recent South African study found that engagement with climate activists as a part of an educational programme was celebrated as providing an integrated, embodied experience which engaged learners' emotions, creativity, and spirituality, providing a joyful and healing safe haven from "violent" national politics.

Another recent study in the USA found that young climate activists play dual roles as learners and educators: learning how social movements operate while educating others on issues of climate justice (Trott, 2024). This warrants a closer investigation across different contexts as it could offer significant potential for transformative change in challenging intergenerational power dynamics within education.

Reviewing the post-2018 literature on youth climate activism, Marquardt et al. (2024) suggest that although rapid quantitative studies offer an entry-point to this field of study, a step-change is required with research that centres young people, challenges adultism, and goes beyond the misleading conceptualisation of youth as a homogeneous group (Neas et al., 2022). Studying youth-led climate activism in Global South contexts is particularly important to move the field beyond theories generated through a narrow focus on mainly white, economically privileged participants. This is necessary to capture the diverse perspectives, experiences, and contributions made by young climate activists around the world, particularly considering calls to question western universality and counteract the impacts of coloniality in the climate movement (Karsgaard & Davidson, 2023; Ritchie, 2021). Furthermore, recent research suggests that young people's perceptions of climate change and willingness to act vary between countries. A review of 51 studies covering 20 countries (Lee et al., 2020) found that young people in Australia, the USA, and the UK

were less concerned and less willing to act on climate change than their counterparts in other countries. The disproportionate number of studies in their review which focus on nations ranked as “High Income” by the World Bank (14 out of 20) and the absence of any African studies is a further cause for concern.

Very few works have analysed national or subnational youth climate policy participation, though exceptions include Nilan (2021), Fernandez and Shaw (2013), and Wilf et al. (2024) in Asia, Castañeda (2023) in Latin America and the Caribbean and Vogel et al. (2022), Benkenstein et al. (2020), Zimba et al. (2021), Luckett (2022) in Africa. As a result, investigating youth activism in the Global South could offer rich insights for educators seeking to enhance and support young peoples’ capacities and motivations to meaningfully engage with climate policy. Based on our understanding of previous studies on youth climate activism, we are particularly interested in mechanisms that enable collective action and participation and challenge neo-liberal pedagogies that promote individual behaviour change which is often more incremental than transformative (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; McGregor et al., 2018; Trott, 2021; Verlie & Flynn, 2022).

In the South African context, a handful of studies have investigated youth climate political and policy participation. Beukes (2021) highlights the important role of youth as game-changers for climate action, offering an overview of some youth-coordinated activities. However, the study is arguably methodologically limited, based on a brief document analysis with recommendations made despite a lack of qualitative engagement with young people. Nkrumah (2020, 2021b) explores youth political participation through legal activism, recommending climate litigation. Whilst his study aims to offer insights of “how [youth] could mobilise themselves into a Youth Climate Movement”, (Nkrumah, 2020, p. 358) it does not ground these in any existing networks or coordinated activities that youth engage in. Beukes and Nkrumah both suggest that youth experiences of climate activism are varied, levelling critiques of exclusion and tokenism which demand further study (Vogel et al., 2022; Nkrumah, 2020). Vogel et al. (2022) make a first step towards this, applying a youth participation framework which offers insights into a youth-led policy engagement process at the sub-national level. They suggest that youth policy participation cannot be pigeon-holed and contribute critical evidence showing that how a process is initiated and facilitated has significant bearing on its sustainability and effectiveness. Further research should explore this, looking beyond the single process they studied, to avoid the mistakes made in the earlier literature of homogenising youth participation. Finally, Luckett (2022) focuses on youth activism in the urban periphery of Lephalale, a community born around the coal industry. They untangle and analyse the complexities of youth activism and the relationship between youth (un)employment and environmental (in)justices where young people engage in invited and invented spaces at the political level, rather than a policy level. This demonstrates the need for research into young people’s perceptions of climate-related (in)justices in South Africa and how these shape and are shaped by their complex participatory experiences.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Strategy

Qualitative research aims to explain, understand, and elucidate the meaning of phenomena through words and graphics as opposed to numbers and statistics (Bryman, 2016). Correspondingly, a zigzag method based on the initial inductive coding of data, followed by further refinement and abductive coding based on relevant literature was used to develop our research questions (Emmel, 2013). Zigzagging is a methodology that emerged from the critical realist paradigm which involves crafting a reflexive conversation between data and theory (Emmel, 2013). It sets out to identify causal mechanisms (guided by and to

develop theories) from empirical evidence, drawing on practices from realist and feminist philosophies. This type of research is particularly relevant to the study of justice and power-laden participatory experiences in its intentionality to be non-hierarchical, to acknowledge multiple valid perspectives, and to be attentive to researcher positionality and the ways in which an insider perspective can shape research findings.

2.2. Positionality

At the time of data collection and analysis, the lead author was a member of the youth climate activist community in South Africa. This meant that she was positioned as an ‘insider’ of the group she was investigating (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and had pre-existing working and/or friendly relationships with many of the participants. Acknowledging that this could shape what the participants did and did not disclose (Bryman, 2016) the lead researcher regularly reflected on her interactions (Dodgson, 2019) and was cautious to ensure that participants did not assume familiarity, encouraging them to explain their perspectives and experiences fully (Breen, 2007; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) while striving to maintain an approach which was reflexive, non-hierarchical, and non-manipulative (Cotterill, 1992).

As a cis-gendered, white, young, South African female from a middle-class background conducting research with a group that is largely led by people of colour from different cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds, within a country that has a history of racism, it was necessary for the lead author to remain attentive to the power dynamics of race and racism that remains prevalent in South Africa (Variava, 2020). To mitigate this, she remained reflexive of her positionality, did not claim to know participant’s stories, utilised a self-disclosive interview strategy that tackles power asymmetries (Abell et al., 2006), and made clear what participants’ data would and would not be used for. The second author is a cis-gendered, middle-class white female academic based in the United Kingdom. She was not involved in data collection and was careful not to ascribe meaning to data, ensuring that all interpretation was made by the lead author. As far as possible, results are presented in the participants’ own words so that any interpretation from the research team is transparent and open to reinterpretation by the reader.

2.3. Sampling and Data Collection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on “the researcher’s experience or knowledge of groups to be sampled” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2008, p. 175) as well as snowball sampling based on recommendations from recruited participants. While there was no set checklist for inclusion criteria, youth that had taken on leadership roles (formally and informally within youth organisations) and who had led or co-designed a policy or political process, or who at the time were actively engaged in the South African Just Transition Framework process, were approached for interview. Additionally, the lead author approached young people across different climate organisations, gender identities, and localities represented in the South African youth climate movement. This sampling method is designed for research credibility rather than for generalisability (Bryman, 2016; Lunenburg & Irby, 2008) which we remind readers to be mindful of when considering youth activism in other Global South contexts. Twelve participants took part including five female, five male, and two non-binary young people from five South African provinces.

Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews. Self-disclosive, semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Mason, 2017) introduced a conversational approach allowing the interviewer to react to information shared while striving to reduce power asymmetries (Bryman, 2016; Kvale, 1996). All the interviews were conducted between June and August 2022, at a time suggested by the participant. As the lead author was

based in the United Kingdom at the time of data collection, all interviews were conducted online over Microsoft Teams (11 participants) or Zoom (1 participant). Typically, the interviews lasted between 45 min and 1 h. All participants consented to their interview being recorded and transcribed verbatim. Due to loadshedding and uneven network ranges in South Africa, around half of the interviews were conducted without video to spare data and bandwidth. While de Villiers et al. (2021) argue that this limits access to non-verbal communication, as an insider researcher who is familiar with the participants and context, this was negated through the detection of verbal cues and additional probing to clarify the responses from the questions asked. Pseudonyms have been assigned to participants that are culturally and gender appropriate to protect participants identity. See Table A1 for demographic data of participants—while participants were all active participants of one or more youth organisation, their affiliation has not been disclosed to protect their anonymity. See Appendix B for the interview guide used in collecting the interview data.

2.4. Data Analysis

For the interview data, Nvivo 14 software release 1.6.2 was used to conduct abductive coding. The coding framework was guided by youth participation frameworks examined in Section 1 and emerging ideas from interview transcripts in line with the zig-zag approach (Emmel, 2013). Abductive coding of interview data was guided by themes from the literature, including “barriers”, “climate education”, “climate justice”, “meaningful participation”, and “narrative”. The analysis of “climate justice” began with themes identified in the literature—intergenerational, participation, procedural, recognition, and representation justice. Following an inductive approach, the lead author further explored how youth defined climate justice, expanding the codes to include additional themes such as energy, environmental, gender, racial, social justice, and systems change. Finally, “narrative” codes were subcategorised into “intrinsic” or “extrinsic” motivations, using a zig-zag approach between the data and existing literature.

2.5. Limitations

This study is limited temporally as the collection of data for this research was conducted between June and September 2022. Due to institutional ethical restrictions and time limitations, it was not possible to include youth under 18 in our study despite our intention to align with the definition of youth as outlined in the South African National Youth Policy. Despite this national definition, we found that several youth organisations engaging in climate policy and activism have an upper age limit of 30, rendering it challenging to recruit older participants. Our study is also limited geographically in its focus on South Africa, though this was necessary to expand the focus beyond the global level to include national and sub-national participation and we hope that our theoretical findings may be applicable to other contexts. Our sample size is small, and while although not uncommon in qualitative research of this nature, this does limit the generalisability of our results.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this project was given by the University of Leeds (reference AREA 20-070). A process of informed consent was followed which provided prospective participants with an information sheet detailing the aims, objectives, methods, and data handling procedure which they agreed to in writing. Confidentiality was assured throughout the lifespan of the project, though due to the purposive sampling methods, for some individuals that were involved in or led projects, only a handful of young people had specific high-profile experiences, meaning that participants were informed that their anonymity could not be guaranteed, as it was possible that they could be identified by their peers.

3. Results

Our results shed light on young people's reasons for, and experiences of, climate activism in the South African context. In Section 3.1, we analyse why young people participate, exploring their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, and in Section 3.2, we consider the barriers to meaningful youth participation.

3.1. What Motivates Youth Climate Activism at the National and Sub-National Levels in South Africa?

Routes into youth climate activism are diverse. One-third of the youth interviewed cited lived experiences of climate change and other environmental crises. During their formative years, they had encountered climate impacts such as floods or droughts or grew up near sources of environmental degradation including mine dumps or poorly managed waste disposal areas. Around half of the participants found routes to engagement in climate action through involvement in school clubs or NGO-led education initiatives. Several others entered the climate movement from other forms of social activism, such as gender, health, and democracy building.

Our participants articulated a wide range of motivations for their climate activism, including intrinsic motivations, i.e., engaging in something because it feels good or satisfying and extrinsic motivations, i.e., engaging in something to achieve a desired external outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These are explored in turn below along with the links between them, before being depicted in Figure 1.

3.1.1. Intrinsic Motivations

Previous studies of youth climate activism have cited a general concern for the environment and an awareness of climate change as an intrinsic motivation. Our participants cast a different light on this, with almost all participants emphasising the importance of *context-specific* awareness, often based on lived experience:

"When I got to varsity, they had what they called the Youth Policy Committee (YPC) . . . They were divided in different thematic areas, and I was part of the gender one at first. I remember very well. . . there were not enough people in the climate change working group, even though it was the first one. It wasn't really interesting to me. . . I didn't know what that was, to be quite honest. Then I didn't know how I fit in and all of that. . . 'cause for the longest time, I thought anyone speaking on climate change is probably vegan, probably stayed with monkeys in a forest and was studying them and stuff. And I was like, yeah, I know, I don't think I'm interested in any of that. But then I just remember, you know, watching a video on YouTube. . . that was speaking about our houses burning and. . . what climate change looks like in South Africa and what that means for a lot of South Africans. And I think after listening to that, I got intrigued".—Nolwazi

Participants reported witnessing generalised environmental concern from other young people in South Africa but emphasised that her motivations were underpinned by context-specific awareness and connecting to the realities of their peers and communities:

"We saw the, you know, the fee-paying schools, which are usually working middle class. . . they would come and dominate the discussion and be like 'we should protect the oceans (giggles), we should protect. . . the aquamarines, we should protect life under water.' And I'm not saying we shouldn't be protecting that. But then there was also an issue of a young person who was in rural Eastern Cape was struggling to just get water".—Nolwazi

" . . . climate education that we were working on [is] very accessible to the realities on the ground. And we didn't much want to, kind of, talk about the polar bears, because what do polar bears have anything to do with the South African context?"—Daniel

Kgosi explained how he became involved in climate activism after engaging with a project which aimed to support a disadvantaged community of waste reclaimers living in a waste disposal area:

"In 2014. . .when in the community that was living in there, there was a lot of deaths, so I saw this as an issue and as a young kid I did not know really what to do, where to start, other than to start, like, a high school club where we speak to the Principal about the issue. . .and then by chance, the same year, Youth@SAIIA were hosting a [project]. . . and since then I've been part of other youth groups and [organisations]".

This strong focus on lived experiences and resultant awareness of intersecting vulnerabilities and injustices experienced by local communities was another common motivation, with several participants citing exposure to/participation in other social movements as a precursor to their climate activism:

"I come from an activist family. . . from an understanding [of] societal issues".—Anaya

"My climate activism is relatively new. I started in 2018. It started with, there were xenophobic attacks in the country where basically foreign nationals from other African countries were being attacked by South African locals. And so I attended a public lecture. . .out of interest, for social issues and got a chance to, like, engage with different people from academia, different stakeholders and government. . .People from the African Union which looking back now was really a significant part of my activism journey".—Themba

"I started as a social activist, focusing on issues of HIV prevention. . . then I also became an activist for issues of international humanitarian law. . . then shifted the focus and started in the environmental justice or climate justice movement".—Mthunzi

Many participants were motivated by the perception that climate action was insufficient and either highlighted this explicitly or connected it to their affective response to lack of action, again revealing that context-specific awareness plays an important role:

"Well, my real activism started probably when I got aware about the climate crisis, so that was 2019. I was attending the model UN that SAIIA hosted, and I think if memory serves correctly, there was a video that was played. . .which was explaining what the climate crisis would look like in sub-Saharan Africa and specifically in the South African context. What it looks like now and what is going to happen in the future. And I remember being taken aback by what I was seeing that there was not really a lot being done about climate change".—Tumelo

Young people's context-specific awareness of climate change, including their perceptions of inaction and injustice, affective/emotional responses such as frustration, anger, and overwhelm, which half of the participants noted as a key motivation both for themselves and for others:

"I attended one of the global strikes and it was in Joburg, and I wanted to take part in activism. . . and then in 2020, I basically lost my temper with the world and said that I'm going to boycott school on Fridays".—Rania.

"I think by and large, young people are just frustrated and angry that the system has not been working for them. When you have a 65 plus unemployment rate in the youth category, I think we are speaking of a society that is in perpetual crisis, perhaps because this has been consistently over many years. . .we need to be able to understand the relations of power and how it affects communities and people on the ground. . .[we need] the kind of forces, or powershift, within the ruling party and within other political parties that showcase that the issue of climate is on the agenda, but it's one that's being, not being

collectively agreed upon. . . we've seen there's a huge desire for this. We've seen huge interest in young people wanting to work together to solve some issues".—Amir

"I think lived experience is something that's really important and it's and the way that you interact—action is not through policy, it's not through a policy briefing. It's through lived experience, right? So. . . the way that you're going to get someone to get up and act is, you're gonna say the fact that bread is expensive, or whatever it is the thing [that] isn't growing well. . . you know, there's a drought, so nothing's growing. If you explain that this is going to continue to happen, that's when someone that's emotive, you know, someone is going to get angry about that and [they are] going to act".—Anaya

"It always feels like you better off to address climate change when you are equipped, rather than when you are not"—Kgosi.

Access to participatory opportunities, including through formal and non-formal education, was also mentioned by several participants as an important motivation for youth climate activism. These intrinsic motivations therefore appear to be mutually reinforcing, with participatory opportunities creating spaces for young people to reflect on their lived experiences, context-specific awareness and affective responses while offering routes to further learning and action.

"My school was privileged enough to participate in model UN, and then we were surrounded or, we always thought about big key things happening around the world, so got exposed to [the] issue of climate change one, but also experiencing effects of climate change, and seeing by family in Limpopo experiencing the effects of climate change. Living through them and trying to also adapt and find ways to live through it. And so that's primarily what drove me, that was my intro to the space".—Lerato

"I was immediately overwhelmed but then I. . . saw the opportunity to join the 2019 YPC that [South African Institute of International Affairs] (SAIIA) has and so that's where I was thrown into what climate change was, what the actual climate crisis was, and how we respond to it".—Tumelo

"The actual devastation and damage occurs across the continent firstly and then across the world, it became very clear, especially around the times that we saw massive wildfires, especially around the time we started hearing about this idea of day zero. . . Even back then when I was in the final years of high school, we had those conversations about, what if we had a drought? What if we had this? What if we had that? And so, when I started being a part of the environmental club, I learned a lot more about those things".—Daniel

Some participants were also motivated by self-confidence in their skills and agency. Here, the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations was particularly apparent, with clear links between their positive experiences of growing self-confidence and the collective formulation of constructive hope, bolstering young activists' belief that their actions (both individual and collective) could make tangible differences:

"I don't do science. I couldn't help on the science side of things and with terms of policy like I it, I find it really difficult to read those documents and attend these meetings and not completely, like zone out and shut down. But what I figured that what I can do and what I know how to do best is art. And so, I wanted to try and help and do activism using art as a medium. And so, I began to plan a performance art protest to raise awareness about the climate crisis. And so that's where my activism started".—Rania

"This was a moment of hope where. . . thousands (or if not hundreds) [were] of young people out in the streets of Pretoria demanding justice and change".—Amir

The positive experiences of unity and community encountered in participatory spaces also acted as intrinsic motivation, while fostering a collective sense that their participation

was a beneficial outcome, given the need for increased youth representation in socio-economic decision-making:

“SAIIA in their programmes opened me up to like a diverse group of young people from all across the country, from different backgrounds, different schools, different everything, and so that was really big learning curve for me. . . really allowed me to feel this was a sense of urgency in myself to say that it’s really important that I am as a young person advocating for social issues that I see in my community and that as a young person, I take a stance and making sure that I involve myself in and becoming not only conscious about what is what is the socioeconomic context around me but also how what can I do, what role can I play to advocate or be a catalyst for change?”—Themba

3.1.2. Extrinsic Motivations

Extrinsic motivations highlighted by our participants included the pursuit of political, social, and environmental outcomes, ranging from incremental political actions to radical socio-economic reforms. Rania demanded *“for the Department of Environmental Affairs to declare a climate emergency”*, meanwhile Lerato emphasised the following:

“I feel personally that climate policy, I’m engaging in climate policy, is very critical in order to shape. . . implementation on the ground. . . And I also needed a way to hold government accountable because we know government is there to ensure the well-being of people”.

While Daniel felt that, as follows: *“Youth have been the call for change time and time again and I think right now we see it even more clearly and that the only way forward is not to call for economic justice or social justice, or environment—is to call for an entire system reform. It’s calling for the system to be uprooted”.*

Many participants were motivated by a strong desire to challenge practices they perceived to be unsustainable and unjust. This included perceptions of intergenerational injustice:

“Young people will get to make decisions for our future because we are the ones we have to face the consequences and then have every person be involved in this space in whatever way they can”.—Kgosi

All youth participants consistently emphasised the importance of inclusive, intersectional approaches to climate justice, striving to address social injustices through the meaningful inclusion of groups marginalised by their gender, race, and indigeneity. An increased representation of young people in the climate movement was a key extrinsic motivation:

“We can’t afford to have young people give up on this. This is a fight that they must be a part of”.—Nolwazi

However, many participants also demonstrated a strong understanding of intersectionality and a commitment to improving the inclusion of other groups.

“The climate space didn’t have enough black voices, especially black female voices. . . in the climate space or the climate discourse, women were seen as vulnerable. . . and it was left at just that. . . [they] had to be protected by everyone, you know. Umm, but that was funny because the more I read up on climate change and Africa, I realized that women were truly at the forefront of, you know, climate mitigation and adaptation when it came to climate change, because they lived in these communities and they saw the little changes in the environment”.—Nolwazi

“Before we did this program and training many of [the communities my organisation works with] which are often working class, lower income, largely African thought the climate, the climate crisis to be a white issue. A white person’s issue. So that idea, of race, then featured. . . we had to break those notions. . . when we do antiracism work,

we understand racial justice is interconnected to climate justice, social justice, economic justice and so on”.—Amir

“[linking] Climate change to bread-and-butter issues and making sure that people understand the effects. . . Nobody cares that the temperature’s increasing, but they care that because the temperature is increasing, you’re not going to have water, or food, or your housing is not going to be withstand the flood or whatever it is”.—Anaya

Rania and Themba reflected on the need for intersectional representation:

“My activism kind of changed its focus from being about spreading awareness about the climate crisis to being intersectional and inclusive, fighting for inclusivity and making sure that no one is left behind because in these political spaces, it’s very often governments and ministers deciding what is fine. My activism centres around engaging in climate policies and making sure not only that young people are engaged, especially in climate policies, but also that youth voices are represented, especially those of women”.—Rania

“When [young people] are included, we not only fight for our inclusion, but it becomes a fight for inclusion of other marginalised groups. . . when you empower young people and amplify the voices of young people, they also bring in the voices of other marginalised communities such as women and grassroots communities”.—Themba

Participants further emphasised the importance of inclusivity asking the following:

“So how do we make it more accessible for indigenous voices? That is again the state because the state is the only mechanism that I’ve identified that can do it, going and actively bringing in people from indigenous communities to also be part of these discussions”.—Tumelo

“But young people do want to engage. It’s just giving them the space and opportunity; I think to do so and ensuring that the systems that do govern us are geared to respond to their needs and not push them to the wayside”.—Amir

Interestingly, almost all participants emphasised the concepts of a just transition and intersectionality as central to their demands, regardless of their varied motivations and routes into youth climate activism.

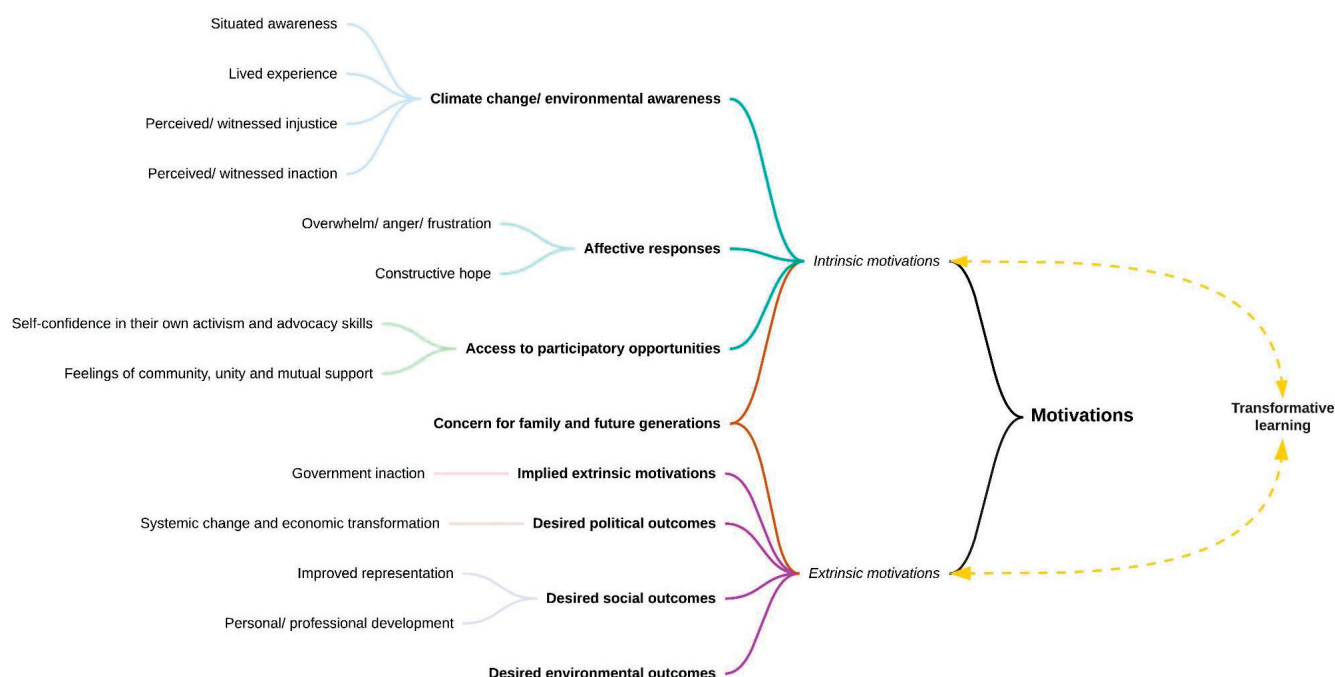


Figure 1. A representation of our findings on youth motivations for climate activism.

Section 3.1 has explored young people's intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for participation in climate activism in South Africa. These motivations and the links between them are synthesised and depicted in Figure 1. This Figure also strives to capture the relationship between motivations and transformative/transgressive learning which we understand to be changing perceptions of climate change and its solutions as well as changes to young people's identities (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015). This is based on our understanding that each of the motivations here could also be considered examples of transformative/transgressive learning. Developing climate change awareness based on context-specific understanding, lived experiences, perceptions of injustice, and perceptions of inaction are all shown in these results to change how these young activists understand climate change and themselves, and the affective responses of frustration, anger, and overwhelm all arguably make young activists receptive to transformative/transgressive learning and the formulation of constructive hope through access to participatory opportunities and the feelings of unity, community, and self-confidence again could all be seen as examples of young people undergoing a clear shift in how they perceive a climate changed world and their role within it.

A consistent narrative emerged of youth and their networks as key agents of change who demanded collective action and systemic change:

"We are tired and aren't going to be quiet!"—Daniel.

"Young people are the ones standing up. . . [saying] this is the policy we need, or this is the alternative we need, or this is how we're going to do it".—Anaya.

The participants also discussed key stakeholders, and their perceptions of vulnerability and blame based on unequal power dynamics and differentiated capacities. They favoured a justice framing when speaking of who should deliver climate action, with a vaguely referenced 'government' as responsible for the distribution of [climate] justice, while women, youth, and marginalised communities were seen as its primary recipients. Young people's perceptions of (in)justice were extremely important motivators for their participation. These are explored in Section 3.2.

3.2. Barriers to Meaningful Youth Participation

The inverse of what motivates youth, i.e., what demotivates youth has also been investigated as the barriers to meaningful youth participation—of which our participants identified many. Several participants spoke of tokenistic and limited engagement with youth. The youngest participant, Tumelo, explained that the first barrier was access, as a very limited number of people get access to the rooms where decisions are being made, with access predominantly granted through youth organisations. Lerato added that the way to gain access was *"to be on the database on the mailing list"*. However, this can lead to a very narrow youth representation. Several participants raised concerns about youth appointments, where one young person is elected to a body to represent the voices of all youth. The most cited example was Ayakha Melithafa, who is the only youth commissioner on the Presidential Climate Commission.

"the pressure is on this one person to be talking on behalf of all these people. . . Ayakha has been one very good example of someone who's struggled with this. . . like, 'OK, well, now I'm supposed to speak for all these people. . . what mechanisms are there in place for me to represent [them]?'"—Clara

A further limitation is the technical nature of policy language. This barrier is two-fold: firstly, climate policies involve extensive climate jargon, and secondly, the country has 11 official languages, but policies are only communicated in English. Rania, who refuses to

engage in policy for its lack of inclusion of marginalised voices, remarked *“why engage something you don’t understand?”*

Ameena reflected on the need for education and capacity building to support youth participation:

“You know how much capacity young people are given within this space and how quickly they have to. . . build capacity and knowledge in order to engage and be taken seriously. . . my experience with climate policies specifically has been the lack of educational structures and capacity building spaces that [support]. . . young people to actively engage with policy”.

Even when nominally provided, education and capacity building can be a barrier to meaningful participation, laden with adultism and used to disregard young people’s perspectives. After young people gain access into decision-making spaces and provide input or ask questions, Tumelo remarked that they are often met with a response of the following:

“Thank you for all that information, now let me actually educate you on what’s happening”.

Similarly, Mthunzi shared a typical response when young people do raise their voice:

“Oh! the young person has spoken. Thank you very much. That was very powerful coming from a young person. . . They don’t really care about what I have said, but what they care about is that I’m young and I’ve spoken. And to me, that’s not being taken serious”.

Participants also highlighted the difficulties of navigating and belonging in the climate policy space. On one hand, overcoming imposter syndrome and feeling knowledgeable enough to enter and become active within youth groups and then engage with decision-makers was highlighted by Kgosi:

“Not everyone feels adequate enough to share their experiences”.

On the other hand, Tumelo explained the mental challenge of taking a break from activism, while still experiencing burnout: *“If I take a break, am I leaving a vacuum?”*. He added that *“[you] need a lot of optimism to be a climate activist”*.

Another concern raised was that young people should not need to meet a threshold level of credentials to be taken seriously. Nolwazi mentioned the need to have the *“right credentials or the right MA from the right university”* and Kgosi exclaimed *“you don’t need a degree to sit with Barbara Creecy [The former Minister of the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment (DFFE)]”*. Anaya instead referred to a generational divide suggesting that young people have a dissimilar struggle (of climate change) to the older generation who fought against Apartheid, they are perceived to lack the *“struggle credentials”* to be heard and respected as activists.

Even if an engagement was fruitful, and young people were able to share their inputs, several participants shared a similar expression to Themba who argued that, as follows:

“we have these meaningful conversations with stakeholders, but then we don’t really get a follow up from there”.

Due to the lengthy turnaround of policies, youth participants had explained that it was difficult to gauge the extent to which their inputs were actively included, and whether they were included because youth raised them as opposed to civil society or NGOs raising them.

Clara elaborated on this perception of tokenised engagement, highlighting the need for adequate time to be dedicated to the participation and subsequent processes of feedback and accountability:

“I think often it’s about having a token youth, which is like what you’ve said, where there’s one young person who manages to, like, get into that space and then needs to

advocate to bring more young people into that space. . . It also brings into question our entire system. . . it's [not enough to] . . . do a workshop and once the decision has kind of already been made. . . [say] we're gonna ask for people to respond and give feedback. . . the deadline is tomorrow. Then . . . feedback isn't incorporated in any inclusive way because they haven't allowed the time and the spaces for that".

4. Discussion

4.1. What Motivates Youth Climate Activism at the National and Sub-National Levels in South Africa?

4.1.1. Intrinsic Motivations

Intrinsic motivations cited by our participants can be categorised broadly as an awareness of climate change and related environmental challenges, and affective responses to these challenges and the availability of participatory opportunities (as depicted in Figure 1). Although our findings share many similarities with the previous literature, showing that young people in South Africa share many motivations with their counterparts in other countries, there were some notable differences.

An awareness of climate change and other environmental challenges has been found to motivate young climate activists in the Global North with studies in Austria, Switzerland, Portugal, and Norway referring to a general expression of ecological concern (Haugestad et al., 2021; Kowasch et al., 2021; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Monteiro & Capelari, 2023). Our results suggest that although generalised environmental concern is felt by some young people in the Global South, the motivations for those who engage in climate activism reflect a more situated, context-specific awareness of climate impacts and other environmental hazards, based on lived experience. This difference may be because South Africa is already experiencing the effects of climate change, with multiple exposures to droughts, floods, wildfires, and heatwaves (Trisos et al., 2022; Chersich et al., 2018). This supports the argument that young people's concern about climate change and willingness to act is dependent upon whether one perceives that they are/will be personally affected (Lee et al., 2020).

It is not our intention to suggest that young people in the Global North are not already experiencing the impacts of climate change and related injustices, only that these experiences are yet to be sufficiently captured yet in the literature on youth climate activism (notable exceptions being studies of Northern indigenous youth) (Grosse & Mark, 2020; MacKay et al., 2020). This gap is symptomatic of the unequal distribution of environmental harms to underprivileged individuals and communities (Bullard et al., 2016) coupled with the methodological choices made in previous studies on youth climate participation and activism. The former, in its focus on international processes such as the UN climate negotiations where participation is limited to young people who have sufficient privilege to overcome the financial and other barriers to accessing the space (Marquardt et al., 2024; Thew, 2018). The latter, in its focus on major Global North cities where many participants have above average levels of privilege (Neas et al., 2022).

Similarly to previous studies (e.g., Brügger et al., 2020; Cologna et al., 2021; Cloughton, 2021; de Moor et al., 2021; Eide & Kunelius, 2021; Feldman, 2021; Kowasch et al., 2021; Ojala, 2012; Prendergast et al., 2021), we found that young South African climate activists cite affective intrinsic motivations. However, whereas young activists in Europe and Australia spoke primarily of fear and worry (Brügger et al., 2020; Cologna et al., 2021; Feldman, 2021) our participants spoke of frustration, anger, and overwhelm. Rather than being debilitating, these "negative" emotions were important factors in motivating and sustaining their activism. Rather than making generalised, anticipatory expressions of eco-anxiety, our participants closely connected these emotional responses to their situated awareness and lived experiences, further emphasising the importance of context-specific

understandings of climate change. This demonstrates that different intrinsic motivations interact rather than being stand alone and builds upon the literature on eco-anxiety and we reiterate the call made by Coffey et al. (2021) in their systematic review for future work to more closely investigate the link between eco-anxiety and lived experience.

In contrast with other studies, our participants did not mention guilt (Haugestad et al., 2021; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017), nor the anticipation of future guilt (Thew et al., 2022) as a motivation. This may be attributable to our participants' understanding of climate justice and responsibility at the international level, though future research of a qualitative, comparative nature is required to interrogate these differences.

Negative emotions were not the only intrinsic motivations identified. Hope was also very prevalent. Our findings emphasise the importance of constructive hope, rather than hope based on denial as a motivator for youth climate activism (Ojala, 2012). We build upon this in proposing that, when one's understanding of climate change is based on situated awareness and lived experience, hope based on denial is particularly difficult to sustain.

Constructive hope as a motivation for climate activism was often cited in tandem with references to young people's access to participatory opportunities. In addition to climate strikes, our participants highlighted the availability of policy engagement activities, conferences, local community projects, and formal and non-formal education projects facilitated by schools, universities, and NGOs in which young people were supported to research, communicate, and act on climate change. This supports Prendergast et al. (2021) in identifying "structural availability" as a motivation for youth climate activism (Prendergast et al., 2021).

Our results support the previous literature in confirming that youth climate activists are motivated when they feel self-confident about their own activism and advocacy skills as well as that of the groups they belong to (Kowasch et al., 2021; Neas et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2018). However, this debate is still live, with recent studies suggesting that neither individual/self-efficacy nor collective/group are statistically significant motivators of collective youth climate action (Haugestad et al., 2021; Prendergast et al., 2021). Haugestad et al. (2021) seek to explain this finding by proposing that young school strikers in Norway had not yet had an opportunity to experience being "impactful political agents". This is supported by their participants' assertion that participation in school climate strikes was the only way for young people to contribute to climate politics and policy because of their low status and lack of recognition in society. In contrast, our results show that despite young climate activists in South Africa also feeling that their generation lacks social status, they still report individual and self-efficacy as motivations for their initial and sustained participation. This could be because our sample included more seasoned climate activists or could be attributable to the structural availability of a broader range of participatory opportunities which provide opportunities for young people to have positive experiences at a younger age. That said, our participants also made several references to imposter syndrome, demonstrating the need for closer attention to the complex psychological factors shaping youth participation.

4.1.2. Extrinsic Motivations

We also identified a range of extrinsic motivations for young climate activism in this context. Our findings revealed various political motivations, including the desire for the Department for Environmental Affairs to declare a climate emergency, the need to hold the government accountable for climate policy, and calls for comprehensive system reform. These motivations align with the previous literature, which has documented a strong desire to challenge the political and economic status quo and to challenge unsustainable practices (Haugestad et al., 2021; Martiskainen et al., 2020; Monteiro & Capelari, 2023).

We also observed that participants were motivated by perceived confidence that they could contribute to a different future (de Moor et al., 2021; Kowasch et al., 2021; Monteiro & Capelari, 2023). This relates closely to the aforementioned intrinsic motivations of self-efficacy and collective efficacy which several studies have identified.

A recurring theme in our findings was the perception of government inaction and low trust in governments, as highlighted by studies from Cologna et al. (2021) in Switzerland, Feldman (2021) in Australia, Han and Ahn (2020) globally, and Pickard et al. (2020) in the UK. Whereas Bowman (2019), Cologna et al. (2021); Han and Ahn (2020), and Elsen and Ord (2021) found that youth climate activists were particularly motivated by the lack of institutional responses to climate projections and sought to encourage governments to “listen to the science”, participants in South Africa emphasised that their motivation stemmed from the lack of institutional responses to climate impacts and their perception that governments hold responsibility for addressing injustice. This linked closely to our finding that young climate activists in South Africa recognise and are motivated by their recognition of the interconnections between climate change and other social and environmental movements, building upon previous work which has identified similar motivations in FFF strikers and participants in the UNFCCC (Kowasch et al., 2021; Monteiro & Capelari, 2023; Thew et al., 2022).

Climate justice was also a key theme that motivated South African youth, who expressed both 1st order claims of justice for themselves and as proxies for future generations, and solidarity claims. They predominantly framed climate justice in terms of advancing social justice, recognising intersectionality, and prioritising systemic change. Recognising the depths of historical inequalities, both in affecting their lived experience and those around them, they are taking concerted steps to prevent climate change exacerbating these. Thus, while Thew et al. (2020) found that youth claims had changed over time from 1st order to solidarity claims, this was in the context of youth from the Global North, whose primary motivation for their activism was unrelated to their lived experience as has been found here (de Moor et al., 2021; Han & Ahn, 2020; Thew et al., 2020). Despite the differences in methodologies, this remains relevant as it is unlikely youth have been co-opted (Nissen et al., 2020) to express either a first order or solidarity claim to justice, but on principle of their movement (intersectionality) to ensure all people are included from the outset. This concern for family and future generations thus presents itself as both an intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as depicted in Figure 1.

South African youth also expressed a similar intergenerational justice positioning as presented in Ursin et al. (2021). While South African youth expressed the four reasons why intergenerational justice is important—the current vulnerability to climate change, how they bear the brunt of future changes, the youth are the closest connection to the future, and their views are traditionally excluded—they further linked this to a generational divide of defining generational struggles (Ursin et al., 2021). Contextually, the current generation in power in South Africa lived through and fought against Apartheid. While most of the youth today are as Nkrumah (2021a) exclaims ‘born frees’ from social oppression, they are not exempt from the prevailing social conditions that exist because of that, i.e., inequality, lack of access, and lack of employment opportunities, nor the forthcoming and ongoing climate crisis (Nkrumah, 2021a).

Our results support the argument made by Marquardt et al. (2024), that young NSAs can contribute to the re-politicisation of climate change governance. This offers evidence that youth, as an oft-overlooked subgrouping of NSAs engaging in climate change governance, have unique capacities and ideas which other NSA groups could learn from. In doing so, it makes a valuable contribution to the political science literature on the role of NSAs in the Post-Paris era of climate governance in which adaptability and

experimentation are encouraged as key component of polycentric climate governance (Dorsch & Flachsland, 2017; Jordan et al., 2015).

This finding also demonstrates the value of intergenerational learning, thus contributing to the pedagogical literatures on policy-oriented and transformation-oriented learning in demonstrating that by disrupting the traditional model of one-way knowledge transmission from older to younger generations, we can build connections which contribute towards societal transformation whilst simultaneously developing skills to enhance policy implementation (Lotz-Sisitka, 2017; Macintyre et al., 2018).

4.2. *Transformative/Transgressive Learning*

Similar to Kowasch et al. (2021), who found participation in FFF protests enabled transformative learning by enhancing environmental citizenship, we found that an engagement in activism has enabled transformative learning in young South Africans while simultaneously providing renewed motivation for further engagement in collective action. In Figure 1, we have depicted this interconnection between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, the overlap of intergenerational justice as both types, and motivations having a reciprocal and reinforcing relationship with transformative learning. We therefore support the argument that through a greater engagement with social movements, climate change education can have a transformative impact on both the learners and the societies they live in (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Macintyre et al., 2018).

It is important to be cognizant of Verlie and Flynn's (2022) line of questioning—if education is part of the system that youth seek to change, how can education itself contribute to transformation? We believe that one answer to this lies in developing climate change education which supports learners to develop the competencies to navigate and/or overcome barriers to engagement in collective climate action.

The most significant barriers which youth activists were able to overcome in this research were underpinned by either gaining access to knowledge—whether it be technical, scientific, or policy knowledge, or establishing their legitimacy and agency based on their lived and activist experiences. Climate change education should therefore support young people to increase their policy literacy while also striving to overturn intergenerational hierarchies. On this latter point, we support the calls to challenge colonial-capitalist pedagogies that inhibit transformation (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; McGregor et al., 2018; Trott, 2024; Verlie & Flynn, 2022).

The motivations of youth participation clearly indicate that many youths learn about climate justice by engaging within policymaking and activist spaces rather than in formal education, and that many draw upon this experience to become educators themselves, mirroring Trott's (2024) findings in the USA. This leads us to view activism *as* education rather than as distinct from it and builds upon Wiek et al.'s (2012) argument that learning can and should occur with society rather than solely for society. Many youth participation frameworks and pedagogies explicitly or implicitly perpetuate the notion of a spectrum in which adults hold power and knowledge and young people can either be passive recipients or try to wrestle control from older people. By categorising barriers to youth participation, we find that youth are challenging this oversimplification, showing that in many instances, young people's engagement in dissent (O'Brien et al., 2018) interrupts this zero-sum framing of power. This lends weight towards the reconceptualization of education as a collaborative, dynamic, and reflexive way in which generations can work together to deliberate and co-produce participatory justice (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015).

While our findings align with Trott (2024) in demonstrating that youth activists can be educators, systemic barriers remain which prevent them from being recognised as such (McGregor & Christie, 2021). We find that where young South Africans are taking on

the mantle of education, they have become the teachers and are shifting perspectives on who can teach who, and who learns, creating a bi-directional flow of information (Trott, 2024; Verlie & Flynn, 2022). This aligns with McGregor and Christie (2021)'s finding that Scottish activists feel they can and should contribute to climate justice education, though the ambivalence of teachers in their study to accept this suggests a need to step beyond the confines of the classroom if we are to facilitate collaborative, transformative learning.

Our findings on the importance of context-specific awareness as a motivation for young climate activists supports the proposal from Kowasch et al. (2021) that climate change education should incorporate local, situated case studies into the curriculum to help learners connect to their own lived experiences. Recognising the importance of intrinsic motivations, we also emphasise Maria Ojala's important work (e.g., Ojala, 2012) in calling upon educators to create spaces for reflection on emotions to support students to constructively channel their emotions.

McGregor and Christie (2021) found activism and civic education could act as an education process and that climate justice education could learn from youth-led movements. Simultaneously, Kowasch et al. (2021) argued that activist spaces create alternative learning environments, and through teaching others, it inevitably enables transformative learning. Here, we suggest the use of and support for experiential learning experiences inside and outside the classroom as an avenue for youth to engage in climate activism and policymaking. Where Macintyre et al. (2018) highlight that policy literacy is a critical but often missing element in education, our findings suggest that youth-led activism is already helping to fill this gap.

5. Conclusions

This study explores youth motivations for and barriers to their climate activism within national and sub-national levels in South Africa. Guided by our lead-author's long-term engagement with South African youth climate networks and drawing upon in-depth semi-structured interviews with young activists who engage in a variety of climate governance spaces, we offer rich empirical contributions to start filling the research gap relating to youth activism in Africa and across the Global South. We then reflect upon the implications of these findings for climate change education and offer a series of provocations for policy-oriented and transformation-oriented pedagogies.

To explore why they participate, we explored their intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, finding that youth climate activists in South Africa are motivated by many of the same factors identified in other contexts, though, in contrast to their peers in the Global North (Cologna et al., 2021; Haugestad et al., 2021; Martiskainen et al., 2020), they particularly emphasise lived experience and what we refer to as "situated/context-specific awareness" (Figure 1). This provides an early indication that as members of the global youth climate movement increasingly have first-hand experiences of a climate-changed world, we could expect their activism to be strengthened and sustained, rather than undermined and eroded. This leads us to call for a greater inclusion of local, context-specific case studies in climate change education to motivate further engagement.

We also find that young South Africans use their policy and political participation to emphasise the intersectionality of climate, age, gender, and racial justice. Similarly to other NSA groupings (Keck & Sikkink, 1999; Carter, 2018), young people can therefore be seen as important contributors to climate change governance who engage in issue-framing and norm-setting in concerted efforts to re-politicise climate discourse (Marquardt et al., 2024). This leads us to call for an increased recognition of youth as holders of valuable knowledge and skills and for the provision of multi-directional, intergenerational learning.

Ultimately, we conclude that youth engagement in climate change policymaking and politics has significant transformative potential, and should be promoted and studied as key sites of learning, especially in contexts where young people are already experiencing climate change and living through it.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Demographics of participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age Group	Province
Nolwazi	Female	18–24	Gauteng
Themba	Male	18–24	Gauteng; Western Cape
Anaya	Female	25–34	Gauteng
Daniel	Non-binary	18–24	Western Cape
Amir	Male	25–34	Gauteng
Rania	Non-binary	18–24	Gauteng; Western Cape
Lerato	Female	18–24	Limpopo; Gauteng
Kgosi	Male	18–24	Mpumalanga
Mthunzi	Male	25–34	Kwa-Zulu Natal
Tumelo	Male	18–24	Gauteng
Ameena	Female	18–24	Western Cape
Clara	Female/non-binary	25–34	Western Cape

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me about your climate activism?
Where and when did your activism start?
2. What (youth-led) projects have you been involved in?
What was your role?
How did you connect to/organise with other young people?

3. Are there any partnerships/networks between youth organisations for these projects?
4. What are the main themes/goals which you(th) are working on/advocating for?
Who is it for?
Why is it needed?
5. How have you been involved in any of governmental policy processes?
At the local, national, and international level?
Examples: Draft Climate Change Bill, NDC, Just Transition Framework, UNFCCC COP, Climate Action Plans
6. Do you think your concerns as a young person are reflected in current climate policies?
Have you seen any tangible impacts from young people's lobbying/campaigns?
7. What are the challenges you have faced in participating?
Do you think these challenges are unique to young people?
8. How would you define meaningful youth participation?
How would that look?
What would be the process?
In your opinion, is the model near to that or does it need work?
9. Is there anything else you would like to talk about today? Anything you think I've missed in the questions above?
10. Do you have any questions for me?

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Article

Climate Activism in *Our Part of The World* and Methodological Insights on How to Study It[†]

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[†] The research project, of which this paper is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board (No. Pro00101347). All interview data has been anonymized and any and all interviewees who are quoted or described have been given codes. All participants were offered a chance for donation to their chosen nonprofit organization by the researcher as a gesture of appreciation. This paper draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Killam Trusts, and The Canada Graduate Scholarships-Michael Smith Foreign Study Supplements (CGS-MSFSS) program.

Abstract

This paper presents an ethnographically informed analysis of research in Cairo and Sharm El-Sheikh (Egypt) surrounding the 2022 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP27) summit. I discuss the geopolitics and geopolitical disruptions of researching activism and activist lives in politically sensitive environments. As shown here, developing new methodological interventions plays a crucial role in understanding contextual methodological limitations, dealing with logistical challenges, and building authentic relationships with research participants. Here, I introduce counter-interviews as a methodological strategy to build trust and invest in researcher-participant relationships. This article draws on participant observation, conversations with environmental and climate activists and non-activists in Cairo prior to and after COP27 and in Sharm El-Sheikh during the second week of the summit, reflective field notes, and 20 semi-structured interviews conducted online between February and August 2023. Here, I use the term “environmental non-activism” to draw attention to the sensitivity, complexity, and fragility of political or apolitical environmental and climate action in an authoritarian context where any form of collective action is highly monitored, regulated, and sometimes criminalized by the state. The main argument of this paper is that examining interlocking power dynamics that shape and reshape the activist space in relation to the state is a requirement for understanding and researching the complexities and specificities of climate activism and non-activism in authoritarian contexts. Along with this argument, this paper invites climate education researchers to reevaluate what non-movements and non-activists in the Global South offer to their analyses of possible alternatives, socio-political change, and politics of hope (and to the broader field of activism in educational research, where commitment to disruption, refusal, and subversion play a key role).

Keywords: research in authoritarian states; environmental non-activism; climate non-activism; social non-movement; environmental activism in the Middle East; Egypt; counter-interview; COP27; democracy and the environment

1. Introduction

Environmental activism in the Middle East? This is the first response that I usually receive when people ask about the topic of my research, with a focus on the question intonation. I

will promptly show them images from the Fridays for Future İstanbul demonstrations that I captured throughout my fieldwork (Figure 1) to further ignite their curiosity. The more interesting questions come next when people are more surprised, amazed, or sometimes confused as they learn more about climate activism in authoritarian countries and how or why researchers like me study these movements.



Figure 1. A Fridays for Future Demonstration in İstanbul, Türkiye. Captured in September 2021.

Those in my audience who express surprise when learning about environmental and climate activism in the Middle East are not alone in their assumption! Even some political and social scientists overlook or completely reject the idea of the existence and activity of environmental movements or ENGOs (Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations) in autocratic and authoritarian contexts (Böhmelt, 2014; Ku, 2011). This is an immediate consequence of making a strong connection between non-state actors and democracy. However, research demonstrates that environmental NGOs and movements do exist under

single-party regimes, monarchies, military regimes, and personalist dictatorships, as examples of China (Hampton, 2005; Bello, 2007; Tai, 2015; Gunter, 2015), Russia (Carmina & Fagan, 2010; Fedorenko, 2017), Malaysia (Yew, 2016), and Taiwan (Thang et al., 2011; Hu, 2011) indicate.

Based on the level of oppression in the socio-political sphere, NGOs experience different levels of freedom to act and have different levels of access to resources and opportunities to organize, advocate, and educate (Böhmelt, 2014, p. 446). Ayana et al. (2018), for instance, argue that NGOs can effectively influence environmental policy-making in semi-authoritarian regimes. However, NGOs need to employ different strategies and tactics in comparison to their fellows working in democratic societies, as they are often not invited nor welcomed to comment on or participate in environmental policy-making under repressive socio-political conditions. One of these tactics is to act indirectly and distance themselves as much as possible from the central state both in their media outlets and policy strategies to deal with complicated situations and to reduce the chance of closure (Gunter, 2015). For instance, since NGO actors cannot target the government's unsustainable actions and policies, they may focus their resources and energy on alternative environmental designs and promoting eco-friendly lifestyles, as discussed by Fadaee (2016, 2018) in the case of Iranian NGOs.

NGOs may also decide to establish strong links to the authoritarian state, as it controls their survival and resources. For example, Tai (2015) shows that building relationships with the state is more important and beneficial to Chinese NGOs than developing connections with international entities. Therefore, research on the connections between NGOs and authoritarian states challenges the zero-sum understanding of the organizational autonomy of NGOs as the main civil society actors that are supposed to check and criticize the state.

Scholars also suggest that the environment is a less sensitive or safer topic for authoritarian regimes in comparison to human rights and political prisoners, and therefore, a controlled and limited level of public participation maybe tolerated, allowed, or even encouraged by the state to serve as a pressure relief valve (Marquis & Yanhua, 2018; Doyle & Simpson, 2006). Allowing for a controlled and limited level of public participation and being responsive to NGOs' demands to act environmentally friendlier has been referred to as "responsive authoritarianism" (Marquis & Yanhua, 2018). Authoritarian and semi-authoritarian states may even encourage environmental issues to be debated publicly and focused on by civil society actors.¹ In such contexts, NGOs use this "limited opportunity" to establish networks, advocate more participatory environmental planning and policy-making, and introduce themselves as policy actors (Han, 2014).

Along with this line of argument, some research suggests that because non-democracies tolerate NGOs, the environment might be seen by activists as a window to pursue social and political change under authoritarian regimes (Doyle & Simpson, 2006; Han, 2014). For example, Bello (2007) shows that because the environment was not perceived as a political topic in Southeast Asia, environmental movements played a crucial role in fighting dictatorships in the 17th and 18th centuries. In Indonesia, anti-fascist and anti-dictatorship movements organized people around environmental struggles and public health issues as key topics with which to challenge the regime's unaccountability and failure to govern (Bello, 2007).

Environmental activists can facilitate and catalyze political liberalization through generating new individual and collective identities, reinforce social and political solidarity, and strengthen a more demanding civil society.² Such experiences have generated a tendency toward optimistic perspectives on the role of environmentalism in non-democratic societies. For example, Vu (2017) predicts that in the long-run, environmental activism can alter state-society relations in Vietnam and pave the path toward democracy. Environmental

NGOs are inspired by democratic ideas even in non-democratic sociopolitical contexts through demanding public participation, generating new individual and collective identities, reinforcing social solidarity, and negotiating with the state on managing environmental degradation (Nomura, 2007). Therefore, some scholars, activists, and campaigners perceive environmental movements as effective tools to enhance democracy, referring to examples of Southeast Asia, where organizing people around environmental health issues served as a pathway to fight fascism and dictatorships by showing the state's failure to protect people and their environments (Bello, 2007).

However, the complications that sociopolitical oppression creates for environmental activism cannot be underestimated (Yew, 2016) and require close attention to the interrelations of *the social* and *the political*. The pessimistic set of arguments draws on examples of the manipulation or distortion of environmental movements to please and serve the interests of the state, the privileged castes and classes, or international and Western donors (Forsyth, 2007; Fedorenko, 2017; Nagel & Staeheli, 2016). Any sort of connection with foreign donors may also jeopardize an environmental NGO's legal status in an authoritarian context. As with other civil society activists, environmental activists deal with various forms of control and censorship and might be easily accused of espionage, terrorism, anti-nationalism, or threatening state integrity, as indicated in the cases of Türkiye, Russia (Knudsen, 2016; Fedorenko, 2017; Sowers, 2018), and, most recently, Iran.

Despite focusing on a non-controversial issue such as the endangered Asiatic cheetahs in a remote area, Iranian environmental activists were arrested on espionage charges and collaboration with Israeli and American information services (Human Rights Watch, 2019). The director of the Persian Heritage Wildlife Foundation, Kavous Seyed-Emami, an Iranian–Canadian sociology professor and environmental activist, mysteriously died in Evin Prison in Tehran only two weeks after his detention (Figure 2), and six other activists were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 4 to 10 years (The Globe and Mail, 2018). This was a turning point for me as an Iranian environmental sociologist to reevaluate my positionality, and it inspired me to conduct research on the dilemma and politics of environmental activism in the Middle East. What does environmental activism mean and entail in the Middle Eastern authoritarian contexts? This is the overarching research question that brought me to Sherm El-Sheikh, Cairo, İstanbul, and, earlier, to Urmia and Tabriz in Iran to learn more about the interconnections of democracy and the environment in the Middle East.

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork within ENGOs in Egypt, Türkiye, and Iran, three Muslim majority societies with the largest populations in the region, led me to understand that environmental activism³ in the Middle East is more complex, diverse, and fluid than what is usually represented in the academic literature (e.g., Inglehart, 1995; Tuna, 1998; Alibeli, 2004; Katz-Gerro et al., 2015).

Along with situating geopolitical disruptions within the *politics of disruption* as the topic of this special issue, this article invites climate education researchers to revisit what non-movements and non-activists living under authoritarian regimes offer to their analyses of possible alternatives, socio-political change, and politics of hope and to the broader field of educational research and activism where according to Zafar and Startup (2024), commitment to disruption, refusal, and subversion play a key role.

Here, I argue that examining interlocking power dynamics that shape and reshape the activist space in relation to the state can help shed light on the complexities and specificities of climate activism and non-activism in authoritarian contexts. Understanding these complexities requires novel methodological innovations and interventions. This article shares the methodological approach that I designed to successfully collect data and access participants with various perspectives and experiences in a challenging field. It proposes

the use of counter-interviews as a tool to identify and minimize outsider biases and to prevent imposing definitions on the participants in the context of conducting an activist ethnography. As an effort to balance the power dynamics in the data collection process, a counter-interview⁴ is an independent meeting with a potential participant to provide them with an opportunity in an informal and comfortable setting to gather information about the researcher, the research, and the research purposes and products. As shown here, activist ethnography provides an appropriate methodological approach for outsiders and prevents false generalizations (based on universalized definitions) in our analytical and theoretical attempts.



The news of my father's passing is impossible to fathom. Kavous Seyed Emami was arrested on Wednesday 24 January 2018, and the news of his death was released to my mom, Maryam, on Friday the 9th of February. They say he committed suicide. I still can't believe this.

Figure 2. Ramin Seyed-Emami, with King Raam as a stage name, is a Vancouver-based musician and singer.

In my broader research, I explore whether and how environmental activism can lead to a more enriched civil society by expanding citizen engagements, or if it spirals into

political–environmental crises, like that seen with the Seyed-Emami case, or perhaps offers new articulations of environmentalism.

This paper draws on 20 semi-structured interviews with Egyptian environmental and climate activists and non-activists conducted online between February and August 2023. In my analysis, I also rely on reflective field notes, participant observation, and conversations with Egyptian informants, activists, and non-activists in Cairo prior to and after the Conference of Parties (COP) summit and in Sharm El-Sheikh during the second week of the meeting. In the following sections, I first provide context and background on the research, highlighting my positionality and layers of complexity of conducting fieldwork in politically sensitive environments. I also discuss the geopolitical context at COP27. Then, I discuss the theoretical and methodological frameworks, with a focus on counter-interviews, a strategy that I developed to navigate my fieldwork. The Section 5 introduces three categories to represent the diversity of activists' relations to the state, which is followed by discussion, where I highlight the importance of methodological interventions to understand power relations that constrain, demarcate, and (formally or informally) mark the activist sphere in totalitarian contexts. In the Section 7, I return to the role of higher education in supporting climate activism in complex sociopolitical contexts and potential pathways for researchers and educators to employ their privileges in empowering local, regional, and national movements and non-movements, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and influencing policy through research and community engagement.

2. Background and Approach: (Geo)Politics of Impossible Research or *How Do I Get There?*

The challenge of completing a doctoral degree during the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that Iranians are not allowed to enter Egypt postponed my fieldwork for two years. I had to wait not only for the international research restrictions to be lifted but also to receive Canadian citizenship to be able to travel to Egypt, a privilege that impacts my positionality significantly. Long waiting times for citizenship and passport applications served me in an unexpected way: COP27 was announced to be held in Egypt while I was finally able to pass the Egyptian border. But *how do I get there?*

Colleagues warned me about the challenges associated with obtaining government security approvals to conduct social science research in Egypt. The same process was required for any social science research in Türkiye and Iran. During the conservative Ahmadinejad's presidency, a bill was passed to require all Iranian social sciences and humanities graduate students studying abroad who wish to conduct research in Iran to introduce themselves to the government. I was advised to represent my research topic slightly or completely differently to receive the required paperwork. Some researchers thought it was too risky to voluntarily introduce themselves and skipped the process. A colleague advised me not to pursue an approval at all, as "you will simply put your name in their radar", as she saw, which later proved to be right, the whole process to red-flag researchers. Back in 2017, my research was not perceived as a risky topic, as it was concerned with the environment and nature, a less sensitive topic for the Iranian government in comparison to women's and minority rights movements. However, the attack on environmental activists in 2018 and the tragic death of Seyed-Emami changed the perception. Soon, I received expressions of concern and was required by the supervisory committee to present safety plans to protect my participants and myself after multiple incidents of arresting social science researchers living abroad upon their arrival in Iran.⁵

One of the strategies I employed to get to the field was to have a prestigious university affiliation, which not only helped with logistics, such as visa applications, but also facilitated gaining trust, establishing relationships with scholars and researchers, and finding a way to

navigate my life when I felt overwhelmed in a big city like Cairo. I applied to the Boğaziçi University in Türkiye and to the American University in Cairo (AUC) to audit courses. Registering at the AUC provided me with more opportunities and privileges than expected, including providing my only chance to get to the UNFCCC summit. I volunteered for the office responsible for representing the institution at the conference. Upon offering my assistance as an environmental sociologist, my ideas and collaboration were welcomed. It was through the office's generous support that, finally, with many tears and prayers, I was able to get to Sharm El-Sheikh! Although during my time in Cairo sometimes I had to change my name, ethnicity, nationality, language, and religion to get around in the city without raising too many questions, red-flags, or simply attention, the international context of the COP27 provided a safety shield where I felt it might be fine to disclose my identity without feeling obligated to respond to several follow-up questions. In two incidents, I even received successive sympathy comments on the Islamic Republic's brutal response to the Woman, Life, Freedom uprising⁶ in Iran that was happening at the time of the conference.

In my trusted circle of friends in Cairo or even outside, almost every time I mentioned my research questions and goals, people reminded me of "that Italian researcher", 28-year-old Giulio Regeni,⁷ who was tortured and killed in Cairo, and warned me not to rely on my Canadian passport too much! I was always honest about my background with my *potential participants* during *counter-interviews* and let them ask me as many questions as they wished. The concepts of *potential participants* and *counter-interviews* are both explained in the methodological framework section. In the following section, I first provide more detailed context for COP27, as attending to contextual complexities and challenges is crucial, particularly in the case of engaged activist ethnography (Scharenberg, 2023).

3. Geopolitical Context at COP27: Who Is Saving Who? (And from Whom?)

For some, COP27 was supposed to save the Egyptian economy by attracting investment or at least to save the Egyptian tourism industry after the hardships of the pandemic. It was also supposed to save the accountability for the Global North by the Global South that was once achieved. Yet, there was another saving mission for COP27 that started a few months before: saving the life and freedom of Alaa Ahmed Seif Abd-El Fattah, an Egyptian–British political activist and prisoner. His family started a human rights campaign for Alaa's freedom a month prior to the conference. Alaa's sister, also a British citizen, traveled to Sharm El-Sheikh to attract the international community's attention to his unfair imprisonment. Alaa started a hunger and water strike during the conference, which was covered by the media. Yet, all these actions resulted in no betterment of his situation, let alone other thousands of Egyptian political activists who did not have the privilege of holding a foreign citizenship. Campaigners for Alaa were not even successful in granting him a break to spend the new year with his family, and he is still jailed for threatening national security and spreading fake news. Alaa's picture, along with two Emirati political prisoners, was held by human rights activists in COP28 in Dubai who were able to stage a historical protest in the United Arab Emirates (McDowall, 2023).

November 11 or 11/11 should also be considered in order to understand the political context of COP27: a major security show that the government used to scare and scatter activist coalitions and to further temper the "climate of fear for Egyptian civil society organisations to engage visibly at the COP27"⁸ that UN human rights experts warned about (UNCHR, 2022, para. 3). Hashtags on 11/11 in Arabic and Egyptian Twitter started to appear on my feed upon arrival in Egypt in September. The call for anti-government protests on 11/11 started long before on social media, and by November 1, a total of 67 citizens were arrested in relation to the calls (Reuters, 2022). Some argued that the calls

were issued by the Muslim Brotherhood, while others traced it back to Gamal Mubarak, the youngest son of Hosni Mubarak, the dictator who ruled the country for over 30 years and was overthrown in 2011. Egyptian businessman, Mohamed Ali, was another suspect for issuing the call for rallies. Weeks before the promised Friday⁹ of 11/11, the number of security guards increased in major squares in Cairo and Alexandria. Foreign embassies advised their citizens to avoid nonessential travel on 11/11, especially in downtown Cairo and the Tahrir Square area (Figure 3). Churches¹⁰ held their services online and invited their congregations to stay home. Students reported that they were stopped at Tahrir Square by the police and their cellphones were checked. No protests happened under the increased security measures.

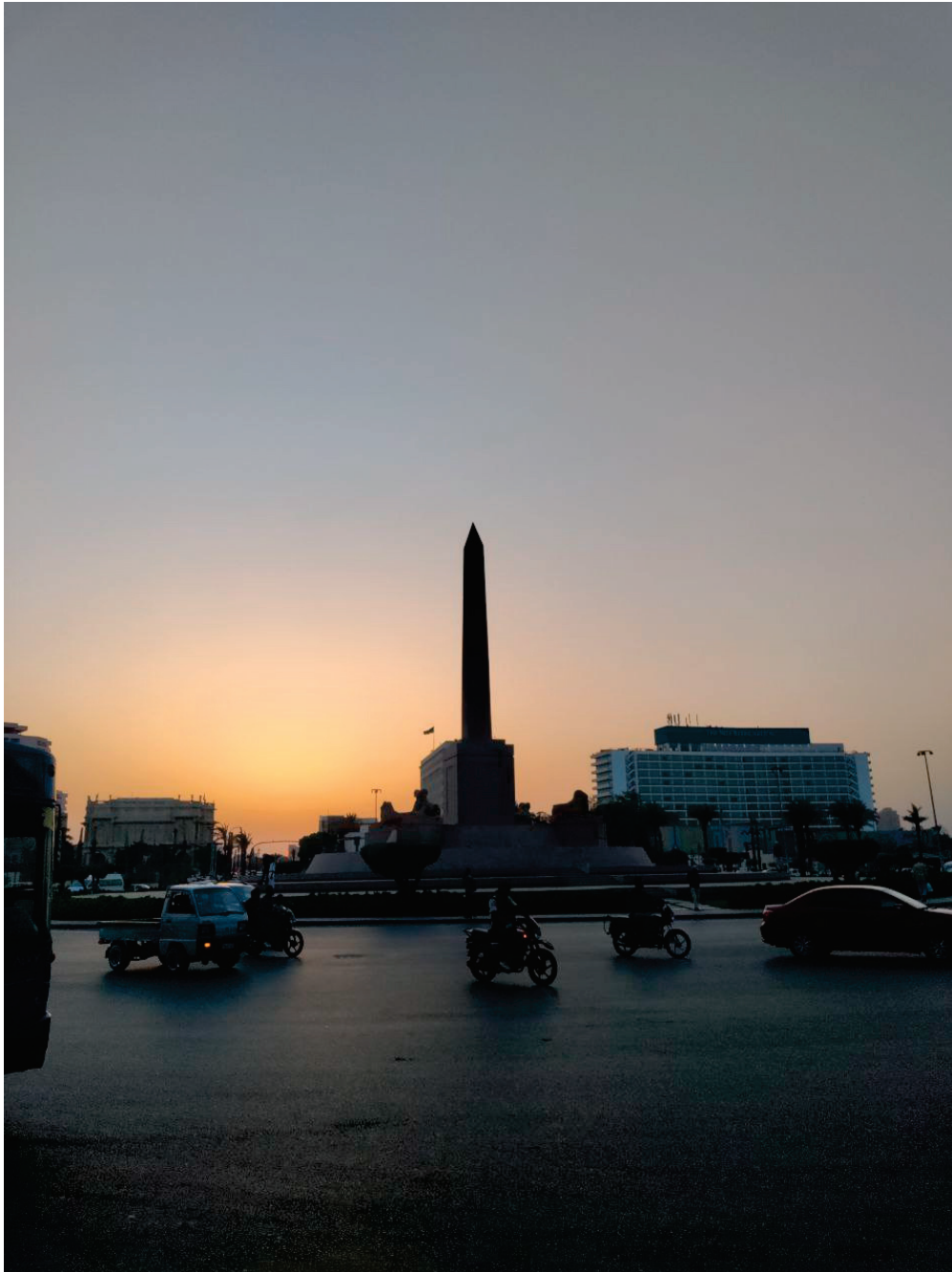


Figure 3. I spent hours walking in Tahrir Square, thinking about its “utopian and dystopian functions” (Telmissany, 2014). The Square is still a highly guarded space where tourists are not supposed to take pictures and the guards walk around 24/7 but especially during Friday prayers.

The arrest of Ajit Rajagopal, an Indian climate justice activist, and his lawyer, Makarios Lahzy, also conveyed the Egyptian government's clear message to Egyptian and foreign environmental and climate justice activists (The Guardian, 2022). A week before the conference, the government also declared a reevaluation of its formerly announced decision to designate a specific space for the Green Zone and Blue Zone participants to interact. Therefore, the direction of traffic remained one-way for the entire conference: Blue Zoners could visit the Green Zone if they wished to, but the Green Zoners did not have access to the Blue Zone. My interviewees repeatedly reported difficulty in navigation due to the design of the venues, long distances between pavilions, and confusing directions and maps. All this contextual information, especially regarding the conscious and unconscious design characteristics of and around the Green Zone, which was the civil society space, raise the question of whether and how COP27 has served Egyptian environmental activists, a question that I asked my interviewees, and their responses evolved as the COP27 fever started to break.

4. Theoretical and Methodological Framework: From Social Non-Movements to Environmental Non-Activism

I started recruiting potential participants upon arriving in Egypt through ENGOs, environmental groups' websites, and social media, including Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook. In my initial emails and messages to the groups and individuals, I heavily relied on my AUC affiliation and emphasized my desire to learn more about environmental challenges and solutions both in Egypt and across the broader Middle East region. If they were receptive to the idea of supporting me on this journey, I would then invite them to meet in person to discuss the research further. I met with individuals who identified themselves as environmental or climate activists, some after long conversations about what it entails. I also met with active individuals who preferred to be called environment, climate, or sustainability *supporters, advocates, or ambassadors*. Some strongly refused the *activist* label and wanted me not to contact them again. Some asked, "What do you mean by environmental activist?" When I explained myself, they said they do those things, sometimes "very actively", but they do not wish to be called an activist because they do not "oppose the government" or "attend protests." Some individuals declined to participate in the research interview, as they did not believe they met the research criteria. However, they expressed a genuine interest in helping me learn more about the city and its culture, which I greatly appreciated and welcomed.

In my first few days of inviting one of my potential participants for a research interview in Cairo prior to COP27, I once found myself justifying his participation in my research, which easily turned to trying to convince him that he in fact is an environmental activist. Imagine us sitting on the patio of a luxury café in Garden 8 in New Cairo (Figure 4), smoking and having an expensive cappuccino. After a long pause following my explanations about activism and its definitions in the academic literature, he turned to me: "So, you really think I am an environmental activist?" It was the magic of doing a pre-interview meeting, or what I call a counter-interview, that led me to this learning moment. As a researcher, it was not my role to persuade people to accept a definition they had not had the privilege or opportunity to be represented by, nor was it my place to shift the attention of their activities and the individual and collective identities shaped by those activities in order to convince them to participate in my research interview.



Figure 4. Garden 8 is a luxury and artistic commercial development by Misr Italia Properties, a major real estate developer in Egypt. New Cairo is home to numerous shopping malls filled with mono-brand stores, cafes, spas, and restaurants.

This made me realize that I was about to meet several environmental non-activists, along with environmental activists in COP27. The process of reevaluating my interview trajectories directed me toward the social non-movement theory. Following Bayat (2013) in theorizing everyday resistance and pursuing change in the Middle East as “social non-movements,” here, I use the term “environmental non-activism” to draw attention to the sensitivity, complexity, and fragility of political or apolitical environmental action in an authoritarian context where any form of collective action is highly monitored, regulated, and sometimes criminalized by the state. Both Türkiye and Egypt, as the largest populations in the Middle East region, experienced major social and political changes in the past few decades that resulted in increased violence, crackdown of civil society, and the arrest and detention of numerous journalists and activists. Egypt experienced a revolution followed by the *Kefaya* (meaning “enough”) movement and Arab Spring in 2011 that led to the fall of the Egyptian octogenarian dictator, Hosni Mubarak, who ruled the country for over 30 years. During the uprisings that toppled dictator Hosni Mubarak, alone at least 846 people were killed and more than 6400 people were injured (BBC News, 2011). In June 2012, Egyptians voted in their first ever free and fair presidential election to put Mohamed Morsi of Muslim Brotherhood in power. Egyptians also approved their new constitution via referendum in December 2012. The country’s crises did not end here, however, and in 2013, a series of protests led to the removal of the first democratically elected president from office by the coalition as a result of a coup d’état. In July 2013, General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), announced the dissolution of the government and suspended the Egyptian constitution of 2012. He has ruled the country since 2013.

Civil society activists in the Middle East turn to environmental issues when political issues are harder to or simply out of reach for civil society organizations, as environmental issues may be perceived as less sensitive by authoritarian regimes. The post-crack-down situation also creates momentum for environmental activists and non-activists who, in the eyes of politicians and the public, are concerned with far more “luxury” or “Western”¹¹ topics than the realities and politics of everyday life in their society. The question then is what are the best ways to learn about activists’ ideas and ideals?

While quantitative studies have contributed to social movement scholarship through providing useful information and statistical comparisons, they usually consider collective action as a fact with tangible outcomes—social movements are considered either as successful or failed in this perspective. A qualitative approach toward social movements focuses on collective action as a process and deals with the ways in which relationships, rationales, norms, and values are shaped and transformed through and by movement events (Melucci, 1989). However, understanding sociopolitical complexities of social movements in politically closed societies is not possible without undertaking qualitative research. Criticizing previous social movements scholarship for attempting to understand and analyze social movements with universalized conceptions, the recently growing field of politically engaged or activist ethnography concentrates on the questions of specificities and complexities of collective actions in diverse contexts (Scharenberg, 2023; Lyon-Callo & Hyatt, 2003). Activist ethnography is a critical mode of social inquiry used both by academics and activists that includes a range of activities, from investigating what informants perceive as problematic and troubling to learning the interconnection of the sociopolitical relations that shape lived experiences. It also includes detecting the “social relations that link what people do in their local, interactional world with practices in which people in other places engage” (Bisaillon, 2012, pp. 608–609).

Researchers working in the field of activist ethnography range from those advocating activist anthropology to those who encourage researchers to focus on social movements

from within by emphasizing on the lived experiences of individual activists (Sutherland, 2012). I understand undertaking research through an activist ethnographic approach as using ethnographically informed methods to explore social movements “from the standpoint of an activist” (Sutherland, 2012, p. 628).

To advance my understanding of activists’ standpoint, I developed counter-interviews, a research strategy that I began to employ particularly to navigate my research in politically sensitive fieldwork contexts. A counter-interview is an independent meeting with a *potential participant*, where the researcher provides them with a chance to ask questions about herself, her research, and, if the meeting goes well, the research interview process and purpose. Potential participants meet the criteria of the research but their participation in the research cannot be guaranteed until after the interview is completed, especially in a politically sensitive context where trust is fragile. The lifespan of the term *potential participant* begins at the stage of contacting the person for an invitation to a counter-interview to the stage of reconnecting for the invitation to an interview session and then up to two weeks after the interview is conducted, as they might decide to withdraw their participation. The whole process may take a few months.

The idea of inviting potential participants for a counter-interview as a basic component of my fieldwork first occurred to me back in 2020. The compulsory shift to online interviews during the pandemic made many researchers rethink their strategies to maintain connection with their participants, especially in emotionally sensitive contexts. An online interview requires not only a stable internet connection but a stable human connection, which is hard to maintain without making eye contact. In 2020, I initiated a research project at the University of Alberta to study the impacts of the downing of the Ukrainian Flight PS752 on the Iranian community in Edmonton (BayatRizi et al., 2022). After one of the emotionally heavy interviews, the participant said, “So, did I give you the answers you wanted for your research?” right after I stopped the recording. When explaining the difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches and how there are no wrong or correct answers, I learned that meeting with my participants before the actual interview is necessary. This would give the researcher a chance to explain the purpose of a research interview and provide the potential participants with an opportunity to ask questions about the interview and research process.

The importance of holding in-person counter-interviews doubles when studying politically sensitive topics and contexts. It is even more important when (and where) conducting social science research is not very common and becoming suspicious of the researcher’s identity and any hidden agenda is also very likely. I provided my potential participants with a chance to know me both professionally and personally and to ask questions about myself, my background, and my purpose. It is through establishing an authentic relationship with the potential participants that I have found the best conversations tend to happen. A counter-interview may lead to a quite informative and valuable conversation that tempts you to start the recording, but I find it as a trap that may scare away the potential participant and results in a feeling that you are sitting with them only because they carry something valuable to you, which is their lived experience. We may have been attracted to them for that reason, but in order to get closer to their point of view and create the feeling that we are safe enough to hear their story, we need to show more: more appreciation, more curiosity, or even more of the real feeling of desperation, which, as researchers, we sometimes feel when our days of effort in the field only lead to dead ends.

I met with several potential participants who had concerns to even be seen with a foreigner and speaking in English, especially if the location of the meeting was not chosen wisely. No researcher wants her potential participant to look around every two minutes to ensure that no one is listening to or following them. No matter how much their fear

feels unnecessary to an outsider, they are the leaders of the stage and should feel safe and comfortable sitting with the researcher, being seen with her, and around the words she chooses to communicate. Buzzwords then play a crucial role in a counter-interview. This is the main reason that I tried to familiarize myself with the glossary of everyday life in Cairo, which I sometimes found is different from that of New Cairo. Through conversations with informants before arriving in Cairo, I prepared a list of uncomfortable terms while trying to understand how to refer to the series of recent political changes in the country: revolution, Arab Spring, coup d'état, protests, social movement, overthrow, and uprising carry different meanings for people from different political backgrounds and age groups. Cultivating trust in a politically sensitive context can be best practiced when the researcher assures her potential participants that she is curious, open, and ready to learn from them and about every detailed aspect of their work and activist life, especially in conducting an activist ethnography.

5. Findings: The Skeptical, the Hopeful, the Proud

In this section, I draw on participant observation, conversations with environmental and climate activists and non-activists in Cairo prior to and after COP27 and in Sharm El-Sheikh during the second week of the meeting, reflective field notes, and 20 semi-structured interviews conducted online between February and August 2023.

Here, I identify three main categories to explain activists' and non-activists' perceptions of the conference: the skeptical, the hopeful, and the proud. These perceptions shape and inform the positions taken by activists for or against environmental or political actions designed by international organizations, governmental agencies, and ENGOs. Understanding these perceptions is crucial in the politics of inclusion and exclusion and whether and how Middle Eastern climate activists and non-activists decide to participate in broader alliances. It also represents the complexity of activist work in a politically sensitive environment.

The skeptical arguments were mainly centered upon the choice of Egypt as the host for a COP. Some individuals saw this as a problematic choice, "awarding the Egyptian government with legitimacy" (FN)¹² and reinforcing its authority when it should be challenged or punished for its actions against democracy, human rights, and the environment. Many used the term greenwashing to explain the choice of Egypt by the organizers and to mention Egyptian government's policies and practices to win or maintain the host position:

"I would say a huge greenwashing would be just COP27 happening in Egypt." (E02, 30, M.)¹³

Some interviewees compared the conference to "a show" or "an exhibition" aligned with the growing commercialization and corporatization of COPs:

"People in the pavilion space had absolutely no idea [of] what's happening in the negotiations about everything they care, completely disconnected, and this gives space for greenwashing, this gives space for corporates to actually divert attention away from the negotiations, it makes the work of activists harder." (E08, 26, M.)

Sponsors of the conference were widely criticized for greenwashing. In September 2022, Egypt's foreign ministry signed a contract with Coca-Cola to sponsor COP27 (Ahram Online, 2022). The decision sparked considerable controversy within climate circles in Egypt and globally due to the brand's longstanding notoriety for decades of environmental and human rights abuses (Tigue, 2022). Activists called on the UN to remove Coca-Cola, along with Microsoft, as sponsors of COP27, describing the partnership as "pure greenwashing" (Tigue, 2022). However, Coca-Cola maintained a prominent presence at the conference, just as it has throughout

Cairo: “Some organizations will never be sustainable, because what they’re doing mainly is greenwashing, “Hi, like, I’m Coca Cola, I’m not sustainable whatsoever, but I’m gonna invest money to reduce carbon emissions”, they just want the good publicity for being sustainable.” (E01, 26, F.)

The choice of Egypt was described as “ironic,” “hypocritical”, and “irresponsible” given the fast pace of the country in environmental degradation. Some participants were skeptical of the choice of Sharm El-Sheikh for the conference and its controllability. Controllable places are not always the safest and most secure places given one’s identity in a politically closed society. Another frequently raised point was the accessibility of the conference in terms of the travel, accommodation, and food costs in a seaside resort city. They also expressed frustration and disappointment when asked about the registration experience and access to badges, especially for the Blue Zone. One participant reported that Egyptian NGOs were requested around USD10,000 to secure a booth in the Green Zone (E20, 43, M). Registration fees were therefore a key barrier for the involvement of Egyptian NGOs in the conference. Some organizations were denied participation in the conference, despite their work closely aligning with the event’s focus, including the Centre for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance (CEWLA), who has worked on the impacts of climate change on Egyptian women in slums and rural areas (Boukhari, 2022).

Therefore, the accessibility of COP27 can be explained regarding (a) access to badges and registration, (b) costs and feasibility of traveling to Sharm El-Sheikh, (c) employing “security excuses” as exclusivity tools,¹⁴ and (d) accessibility of the venue, including difficulty navigating from one place to another, limited accessible to washrooms, lack of baby changing tables, and lack of healthy food options (Figure 5). The Green Zone can in fact be described as a food desert: many participants were frustrated by the high prices, long lines, and low quality of the food. The Climate Action Network International newsletter published on November 10 also reported a sewage management crisis in the conference center (Climate Action Network International, 2022). The accessibility of COP27 was also questioned and criticized because of “the secrecy” and the “last minute policy” (FN), as many did not receive their entry QR codes even after the conference began.



Figure 5. COP 27 venue map (UNFCCC, 2022, p. 15).

The real impact and role of COP27 in the future of climate change were questioned mostly by those who expressed concerns about the costs and carbon footprint of the conference. One participant particularly discussed the potential failure of the Loss and Damage Fund by drawing intersections between democracy, human rights, and the environment:

“We’re trying to take money from the countries of the North, because as compensation for the historical extractivism, which is, of course, very important issue and we all need

to back this up, because it's the only fair thing that can happen, and by coincidence, the governments of the Global South are the most corrupted, and there is no accountability, no transparency. So, who will be monitoring this? Civil society of course. Where is civil society? There is no civil society, they are in prison. So, tackling the human rights issue is inevitable here, if we are speaking about any kind of Loss and Damage [Fund] [...] even me advocating for climate injustices [...] you need civil society, you need freedom of speech to be speaking about this." (E13, 44, M.)

The last set of arguments that should be categorized under the skeptical is the back-to-normal scenario confirming that choosing Egypt as the host for the United Nation Climate Conference will not lead to a major change in the long run:

"There's not that many of us [Egyptian activists], we have seen a rise because of COP27. But now, four months later, [...] the momentum is now not visible anymore, [...] it's more of a thing that they just engage with for the sake of the conference." (E08, 26, M.)

Participants also criticized the government's lack of sustainability vision and long-term plans for engaging civil society in environmental decision making:

"For them [the government] it's still a checklist for certain keywords that they need to say, so that they can get more funds, and more loans [...] everyone is making the other hear what they want to hear. "Will it be a potential for more money?" And now we call it green, and we will be tree huggers." (E13, 44, M.)

The hopeful perceived the climate conference as a unique opportunity for bringing together Egyptian ENGOs, organizational and governmental sustainability sectors, and individuals supporting environmental causes in different roles:

"I think it was a great way to bring attention to the environmental issues in Egypt, and to make Egyptians even just think about the environmental issues. And also, to show that there's a lot of people who are working towards a better future, especially the youth." (E07, 32, F.)

"I have to say COP27 was a golden moment that all the actors working on climate got to know each other and were able to get together and get themselves together [...] and I hope that that this momentum continues, although unlikely will, but at least there is hope." (E04, 40, M.)

Directing public attention to sustainability and environmental degradation in the country and raising awareness in governmental bodies were other benefits of hosting COP that brought hope for a greener future (Figure 6):

"The main challenge [facing environmental groups] was the misunderstanding from the authorities, [...] before COP27 or the announce that Egypt will host the COP27, it wasn't easy to explain to the any responsible [authorities] about the environment, climate change, the human impact, it was like something that to talk about environment, it was a kind of welfare, like, people die, there is more important problems. But also people die from climate change." (E20, 43, M.)

Hosting COP27 also offered a world class opportunity, especially to young activists, and opened doors to regional and international cooperations. Many activists and non-activists were excited to meet and network with people from diverse backgrounds and international organizations hoping to shape alliances and coalitions or to find future jobs and opportunities in both the Green and the Blue Zones:

"It's about the connections. [...] I've connected with climate activists from Namibia, from Tuvalu, from Fiji Islands, and like I've met a queer inclusive feminist from the Pacifics

and working on sexual reproductive health and rights in a climate aware approach.” (E15, 33, F.)

“It was good to found that people share your interest, [...] that you are not alone [...] there is people they share the same passion with you to also to get to know to new tools, to know how to fight for your case in a better way, [...] it was a very good opportunity for me to tell my story” (E20, 43, M.)



Figure 6. Heaven and Hell in the Anthropocene was an experiential artwork in the Green Zone at COP27 to direct public attention to the power of personal actions. To learn more about the project visit <https://fineacts.co/heaven-and-hell>, accessed on 20 July 2025.

Supporting the position of Egypt in international negotiations, some interviewees indicated that Egypt is the representative of the Global South in the international negotiations and this role should be acknowledged and respected. A few weeks before the conference, a potential participant argued that the government will allow demonstrations and protests simply because young climate activists will support the position of the country in the international negotiations: they will be supporting what Egypt and every other Global South country would and should demand, which is holding the Global North accountable for the climate crisis. Climate justice was therefore another recurring theme that can be categorized under the hopeful:

“If you look at the developing and even LDCs, like the Least Developed Countries, or the small island developing states, how they get one weather event that wipes out 200% or 300% of their GDP in a few hours, that’s why it was a huge accomplishment of COP27 to establish the foundations of the Loss and Damage Fund, which is supposed to be dedicated to really compensating those countries that are worst affected by the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events.” (E12, 45, M.)

Another subcategory in the hopeful section is related to political opportunity. Some informants viewed COP27 as an opportunity to attract international attention to the reality of life and complexities of collective action in the Egyptian political sphere:

“I think for any Egyptian actor, regardless [of] what they work on, COP27 was a success, and I’m not here looking from an international community’s perspective, [...] I’m just

looking at the context in Egypt: whether you are a government official, whether you are an environmental activist, whether you are a human rights activist, whatever you're working on, this was a success. Every single activist was able to spotlight issues they're working on and adequately engage with different stakeholders and bring to light things that if COP had not come to Egypt this would have never been discussed or acknowledged, that's why I deem it a success". (E08, 26, M.)

When I asked him to elaborate on the comment on human rights activism, he responded:

"I think COP27 provided a platform, an opportunity for human rights activists to speak that they don't get, just listen, just look at pre- and post-COP, pre-COP all the international journalists were paying attention to issues in Egypt, post-COP they don't. And now they're on to COP28, and that's exactly what I mean." (E08, 26, M.)

The line between hopefulness and disappointment, or sometimes helplessness, was sometimes thin for this group. When discussing democracy and the environment in Egypt with a potential participant in the Green Zone, he said, "Let them see what is really going on in here", referring to the incident of forcing the journalist who asked questions about Alaa in a COP meeting to leave (FN).

The proud considered hosting the conference per se as a win for Egypt. They discussed the difficulty of security management for such an enormous event and admired the Egyptian government for its capabilities in organizing the conference and hosting world leaders. The proud perceived hosting a COP as a major achievement in the country's status in the international community and indicated that it should be acknowledged as the leader of Africa, the MENA region, and the Global South in general:

"I think Egypt before COP27 isn't Egypt after COP27" (E09, 20, F.)

The proud category also referred to various achievements of the country in the environmental and sustainability sectors, including massive renewable energy projects, such as the Benban Solar Park, Egypt's ranking in the Sustainable Development Goals Report (87th), and the launching of the country's 2050 Climate Change Strategy, confirming Egypt's leadership and role model status for other African, Arab, or Muslim countries.¹⁵

"Egypt's Vision 2030 was there since 2015 but like, in the past five years maybe the discourse was more familiar, you start seeing more NGOs coming out and saying that [...] we want to advocate sustainability [...], especially by the time COP27 was being hosted in Egypt, So more NGOs started leaning more towards working on the SDGs, [...] private sector even started creating foundations [...] in order to advocate sustainable development as part of their corporate social responsibility." (E11, 26, F.)

The proud category mostly reflects those participants who worked directly in or were more engaged with the government, the Ministry of the Environment, or government-funded organizations and entities. They referred to Egypt as the leader of the green transformation in Africa, and some provided concrete evidence and examples to support this argument.

There was also a sense of pride among participants for President El-Sisi's opening speech, who called "the city of Sharm el-Sheikh the city of peace, and the first of Egyptian cities to know its path towards green transformation".¹⁶ Relatedly, many participants expressed excitement and pride for their country to host the United States' president and how Joe Biden referred to Egypt as an appropriate host for the COP, as it is historically called the "Mother of the World".¹⁷ Um al-Dunya¹⁸ in Arabic has been and is still widely used in Egyptian and Arab pop culture to refer to the country's ancient civilization, religious significance both for Muslims and Christians, and cultural achievements (Kotb, 2014).

The proud category can be understood through nationalism, which plays a major role in shaping activist identity. In some cases, participants shared their growing national pride and sense of belonging to the country through their love for nature and the country's history.

6. Discussion

As reviewed in the Section 5, there are three main categories to explain how participants perceived COP27 and its implications for their activism. The skeptical, the hopeful, and the proud categories identified and described in this paper indicate the complexity of activists' relationships with one another, the state, the public, and the international community. The skeptical category targeted the organizers of the conference, the Egyptian government, and the commercial sponsors. The skeptical category refers to perceptions of temporality or superficiality of environmental initiatives, reducing them to public-pleasing or donor-pleasing gestures with labels like greenwashing. Lack of accountability for timely and effective climate action was also mentioned by participants who were pessimistic about the ironic choice of the country as a host for the United Nations climate conference. The hopeful category refers to the perception that the conference provided a unique opportunity for different environmental and climate groups to organize, mobilize, coordinate, and collaborate on mutual goals, such as a (more) sustainable Egypt and Africa. The hopeful category also emphasized the COP's capacity to serve as a platform for Egyptian ENGOs to mobilize themselves, educate the public and policy-makers about climate crises, and attract international and governmental funding for sustainable initiatives. Lastly, the proud category considered hosting COP a resounding success for the country, framing it as a defining moment in its regional and global standing. Focusing on the environmental leadership of Egypt, the proud perceived this milestone as a turning point for Africa and the Global South and assumed further responsibility for Egypt to represent Southern countries.

Similar qualitative studies on COPs may employ and further advance the categories introduced in this paper. For example, in their chapter on "Climate change governance and institutional structures in Egypt pre- and post-COP27," El Baradei and Sabbah (2024, p. 283) reported that governmental documents on COP27 "saluted the achievements realized on the national, regional and international levels. At the national level, the government secured funding for its climate change projects and signed agreements with a value amounting to \$83 billion. At the African level, it was an opportunity for emphasizing Egypt's political leadership position among its African peers. And at the global level everyone was proud of the newly established Loss and Damage Fund."

Although most of what El Baradei and Sabbah's interviewees described in relation to COP27 can be categorized under the proud and the hopeful, there are also skeptical perceptions, especially when it comes to civil society participation and public engagement:

"... amongst the problems of the existing institutional structure is the lack of a clear participation mechanism to secure societal buy-ins. [...] some other experts were *doubtful* about the participatory process that the government referred to as being part of the development of NCCS [Egypt National Climate Change Strategy 2050].¹⁹ Either they said that they were surprised to learn that there is a NCCS, or they participated but were concerned about the extent their opinions will be heeded to". (p. 300 [emphasis added])

Applying the three mentioned categories to El Baradei and Sabbah's chapter verifies that participants cannot be categorized rigidly under one category since their position may change in response to different sets of questions. While this indicates the dispersion of ideas and the non-inclusivity of the categories, it also reflects the multifacetedness and multidimensionality of activists' experiences and their perceptions of their own activism

in relation to the state. These peculiarities cannot be understood without considering the sociopolitical contexts in which they emerge, which may change over time and/or in interaction with regional and global forces and processes.

Understanding the politically different and politically closed sociopolitical contexts of host countries and their implications for local and international activists participating in COPs is particularly important now that the UNFCCC is aiming to increase geographical inclusivity compared to before. COP28 in Dubai and COP29 in Baku proved that totalitarian states use the same or similar tool sets to marginalize and silence activists. For instance, during COP28, United Arab Emirates announced the start of a new mass trial prosecuting more than 80 Emiratis, including human rights defenders. According to Amnesty International's Deputy Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, "the timing appears to be deliberately intended to send a clear message to the world that it [UAE] will not tolerate the slightest peaceful dissent" (Amnesty International, 2023), which was also the case with the arrest of the Indian climate justice activist and the 11/11 security show in Egypt that I draw upon in this paper. COP28 was argued to be and advertised as "the most inclusive COP ever with Blue and Green zones working side-by-side to deliver real, actionable solutions" (COP28 Overview),²⁰ and yet, no protests were allowed in the Green Zone (Amnesty International, 2023).

Just as Egypt failed to demonstrate accountability for the conduct of COP27 and barriers created against the involvement of local and global climate NGOs and activists, neither the UAE nor Azerbaijan did, and probably neither will Brazil in COP30. Similar to the non-democratic settings within the countries and their consequences for the broader climate policy-making, the lack of space for activists, civil society feedback, and an online public sphere where the flaws of the conference can be freely discussed undermines the checks and balances essential to democratic governance of the COPs.

7. Conclusions

Those with the privilege to occupy positions in higher education can impactfully bridge the gap between the realities of UNFCCC and the aims and wishes of climate activist individuals and groups, human rights defenders, and marginalized communities by using their expertise and platforms to advocate for policies that address both environmental and social justice, while fostering interdisciplinary research that aligns global frameworks with grassroots movements for meaningful, participative, and inclusive change.

This role is significant for educators from the host country. In the context of Egypt, the previously mentioned chapter by El Baradei and Sabbah (2024), "Climate change governance and institutional structures in Egypt pre- and post-COP27", is an excellent example of providing a channel for vocalizing the informal information and knowledge available to researchers and those in higher education positions within the host country. Laila El Baradei is a professor of public administration in the Department of Public Policy and Administration, School of Global Affairs and Public Policy at The American University in Cairo (AUC), and Shaimaa Sabbah is a PhD candidate in Public Health at the AUC. By utilizing their access to resources, informants, and interviewees in different governmental entities, the work of El Baradei and Sabbah manifests how domestic public policy can benefit from what has come to the front in light of the COP. Researchers' access to cultural, economic, and social capital, research platforms, and cross-border networks can support and amplify climate activist practices and movements while also contributing to the production of knowledge that challenges authoritarian (educational) systems and fosters social change. This type of research contributes to both "Activism *as* Education" and "Activism *is* Education" paradigms while also offering tools for an "Activism *through* Education" approach. The question of how different societies interpret environmental

problems and cooperate in solving them is central in global environmental governance. The answer does not always lie in the development of elite-controlled institutions but should be further pursued through grassroots organizations (Thompson, 2001). Climate conferences provide unique opportunities to address the climate justice gap not only between the North and the South but between the governments and civil society. A crucial step toward an informed climate (justice) action is to understand the specificities and prerequisites of global environmental cooperation and to pay proper attention to the delicacies of engaging activists, advocates, and educators from across the globe to form and facilitate possible collaborations. Understanding these delicacies will be possible through developing novel methodologies and research designs, as shown here.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature that examines how research methodologies and higher education can support climate activism in complex sociopolitical contexts, particularly within authoritarian regimes. It considers how academic and research engagement with climate activists and non-activists, social environmental movements and non-movements, and inside safeguarded COP zones or outside them can be sites of resistance and mobilization, even under conditions of political repression and restricted civic space. Innovative research engagement with climate activists not only highlights the potential of academic institutions and scholarly inquiry to resist oppressive structures and foster critical consciousness but also embodies a practice of “disruption, refusal, and subversion” in its own right (Zafar & Startup, 2024). Here, I introduced counter-interviews as a methodological strategy to build trust and invest in researcher–participant relationships, which can be employed and further developed by activist ethnographers working in politically sensitive fields

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Due to confidentiality and security concerns, the data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available. Disclosure could compromise participants’ anonymity and safety. Requests for access will not be considered in order to protect those involved.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Doyle and Simpson (2006, p. 750) observe that the Iranian government sees state-sanctioned environmentalism as a safe form of participation or a pressure relief valve that ultimately helps to consolidate its power. Their observation, however, is not applicable to the post-Mahsa Zhina Amini uprising Iran. For more on the Iranian civil society after the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, see Khatam (2023).
- ² See Tullius (1997) for discussions on the Bulgarian and Taiwanese experiences in this regard.
- ³ In this research, I adopt Bayat’s (2002, p. 3) definition of activism referring to “any kind of human activity that aims to engender change in people’s lives. As an antithesis of passivity, ‘activism’ includes many types of activities, ranging from survival strategies and resistance to more sustained forms of collective action and social movements”.
- ⁴ In her chapter, “Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms”, Oakley (1981) discusses the importance of establishing a dialogue-based space where participants have the opportunity to “talk back”. Watkins and Shulman (2008, p. 307) use the term “counter-interview” to discuss Oakley’s point. However, Oakley never uses the term “counter-interview”. She provides

an interesting list of questions that her interviewees asked her at some point during the interviews and between them in a longitudinal study on transition to motherhood. The questions raised by Oakley's respondents were mostly focused on requesting information, such as "who will deliver my baby?" (76%). A quarter of the questions were personal focused on the interviewer, while only 6% were on the research and 4% on requesting advice (Oakley, 1981, p. 42). Oakley makes an unconventional decision "to answer all personal questions and questions about the research as fully as was required" (p. 47) despite "the [methods] textbook code of ethics with regard to interviewing women" (p.48), which was mainly redirecting the respondents' questions or ignoring them altogether. Oakley challenges the common dominant-subordinate interviewer-interviewee relationship that replicates male-female power dynamics in the larger society and argues that "'proper' interview is a masculine fiction" (p. 55) that sees interviewees merely as sources of data (p. 48).

A topic we have discussed in (Erfani et al., 2024).

For more background see Khatam (2023).

Giulio Regeni was a Cambridge Ph.D. student studying labor movement and unions in Egypt. To learn more about his tragic death, visit <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/24/why-was-he-killed-brutal-death-of-italian-student-in-egypt-confounds-experts>. (accessed on 20 July 2025).

"Arrests and detention, NGO asset freezes and dissolutions and travel restrictions against human rights defenders have created a climate of fear for Egyptian civil society organisations to engage visibly at the COP27" (UNCHR, 2022).

Egyptians have weekends on Fridays and Saturdays. Friday is the Islamic day of worship when the communal Friday Prayer is practiced at noon in local and major mosques by millions of Muslims around the world. See Brooke et al. (2023) to learn about the political implications of the Friday Prayer in the Middle East and "the Friday Effect".

Many churches in Egypt hold worship services on Fridays (and some on both Fridays and Sundays).

Many Egyptian and Turkish interviewees mentioned the public perception of environmental issues or environment in general as a luxury or Western topic as one of the challenges in their activism.

Reference to fieldnotes.

The coding represents the participants' age (the second number) and gender (F, M, or X).

Egyptian activists were under more rigid scrutiny than foreigners. One of my participants reported that he was interrupted by the police and asked to leave when he was having a conversation with Israeli climate activists during the conference (E05, 17, M).

However, some of my informants and participants did not necessarily see themselves as African or Arab and referred to their Egyptian origin as Pharaonic.

The full speech is available on the State Information Service website at <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/172566/President-El-Sisi%E2%80%99s-Speech-at-the-Opening-Session-of-COP-27> accessed on 20 July 2025.

The full speech is available on The White House website at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/11/11/> accessed on 20 July 2025.

Literally translated as "Mother of the World".

Available at <https://www.eeaa.gov.eg/Uploads/Topics/Files/20221206130720583.pdf> accessed on 20 July 2025.

Available at <https://www.cop28.com/-/media/Project/COP28/files/COP28-Overview-En.pdf> accessed on 20 July 2025.

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Article

Applying the 7P Framework to Youth–Adult Partnerships in Climate Organizing Spaces: “If We Are Going to Be the Ones Living with Climate Change, We Should Have a Say”

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Abstract

Young people are frustrated and disheartened with the lack of adult leadership and action to address the climate crisis. Although youth representation in global, regional, and local decision-making contexts on climate change is steadily growing, the desired role and effect of youth in environmental and climate decision-making has shifted from a focus on having youth voices heard, to having a direct and meaningful impact on policy and action. To meaningfully integrate youth perspectives into climate policies and programs, intergenerational approaches and youth–adult partnerships are key. This paper explores strategies to support youth action and engagement as adult partners by investigating youth perspectives on what adults and adult-led organizations should consider when engaging young people in climate-related work. This qualitative research study introduces a revised version of the 7P youth participation framework, developed through focus groups with high school youth. This paper provides reflective questions and practical recommendations for participants engaged in youth–adult partnerships to help guide engagement beyond token representation and create meaningfully participatory conditions for youth agency in climate organizing spaces.

Keywords: youth–adult partnerships; climate organizing; participatory framework; youth; adults

1. Background

Young people from around the world are increasingly participating, advocating, and voicing the need for urgent, science-driven climate action. Collecting inputs from over 700,000 children and youth, the Global Youth Statement (YOUNGO, 2023), presented at COP28 in Dubai, reflects widespread frustration with current leadership and demands the use of the “best available science to guide ambitious climate action”. Additionally, the Global Youth Statement (YOUNGO, 2022) presented at COP27 urged Parties to “take heed, take charge, and take action” as children and young people identified the urgency and mounting crisis: “We have no more time to lose. Our future literally depends on it” (p. 2). Similarly to Global Youth Statements presented at the last two COPs, that advocate for children and young people’s perspectives to be integrated into formal policy-making processes, the Driving Ambition Manifesto developed by Youth4Climate (2021) stresses the importance of a multi-stakeholder approach, engaging not only youth but also racialized and Indigenous communities. It calls for cross-sector collaboration as

well as advocates for education systems that are responsive to truly empowering young people. Additionally, there is growing demand among young people for climate policies that secure their constitutional right to information and preparedness regarding climate change and its impacts, as evidenced by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's General Comment (2023) for the implementation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. Frustration of climate inaction by young people is also evidenced in the 34 youth climate cases being adjudicated worldwide (UNEP, 2023), and high rates of climate anxiety experienced by young people globally (Hickman et al., 2021; Galway & Field, 2023). Beyond this, racialized youth climate activists face a dual burden, not only advocating for their communities' rights but also navigating internationalized oppression and reflecting on their own practices amidst the very systems they fight against (Grewal et al., 2022; Lowan-Trudeau, 2018). Young people's perspectives matter in climate policy because they represent the generation that will face the most significant and long-term impacts of the climate crisis and youth climate activists often identify the importance of systemic and justice-focused transformation over incremental changes (Karsgaard & Shultz, 2022).

In Canada, about half of young people (48%) learn predominantly about climate change through teacher instruction (Field et al., 2019), but increasingly schools are falling short of fostering the capacities young people need for addressing the complexities of the climate crisis (Stein & Andreotti, 2021; Richardson, 2024; Robinson & Parker, 2024). There is strong empirical evidence that a young person's sense of efficacy and their engagement in social groups that support acceptance of climate change are strong predictors of pro-climate mitigation behaviours (Busch et al., 2019). With this in mind, the question arises whether education is fostering climate leadership among young people or are educational structures stuck within agency-limiting constructs of how young people can engage in meaningful social and pro-climate community learning and service work?

This research is part of a capacity and networking building initiative wherein a university worked with an Environmental Youth Council (anonymized, and referred to as EYC from hereon) to host a high school sustainability summit at a university in Ontario, Canada. A SSHRC Connections grant supported this initiative and provided a platform for young people to design the day-long event focused on sustainability and climate issues that they identified as important, and to explore actions and workshops they wanted to see addressed in their schools. The summit engaged 185 high school students from the surrounding community in the activities coordinated and designed by the EYC. This study illustrates challenges and successes of a youth–adult partnership, primarily using Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) framework, and highlights key considerations for fostering meaningful and intentional youth–adult collaborations in climate justice initiatives.

2. Youth–Adult Engagement: Definitions, Examples, Gaps, and Possibilities

This literature review explores key themes related to youth–adult engagement, including foundational definitions and forms of participation, challenges to adultism and strategies for fostering intentional relationships, the transformative potential of youth–adult partnerships, the risks of disempowering practices, and the conceptual framing offered by Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) youth–adult partnership model.

2.1. Definitions and Types of Youth–Adult Engagement

Youth–adult engagement has been studied across diverse contexts, with varied approaches for facilitating and evaluating its effects. These approaches differ based on age groups and settings—for instance, strategies for high school students may not align with those for post-secondary youth or young professionals. A broad range of models ap-

pear in both academic and practice-based literature, including youth–adult partnerships [Y-APs] (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Hall, 2020; Howell, 2023); youth participatory action research [YPAR] (Bettencourt, 2020; Hall, 2020); youth organizing (Hall, 2020); and youth empowerment frameworks (Susskind, 2010; Mohajer & Earnest, 2009).

This study focuses on high school youth and centres Y-APs—defined as collaborative, democratic engagement between multiple youth and adults working on shared projects aimed at promoting social justice, strengthening organizations, or addressing community issues (Hall, 2020; Howell, 2023). In Y-APs, youth and adult voices should be equally valued and relationships characterized by mutual respect, balanced power, and meaningful collaboration (Arokiasamy et al., 2023; Boys and Girls Club of America, n.d.; Oliver, 2010; Weybright et al., 2016; Zeldin et al., 2013). While not the focus, it is helpful to distinguish Y-APs from related models. YPAR positions youth as co-researchers from the outset of the project, using action-oriented methods to identify, analyze, and take action on issues that impact them and their communities (Bettencourt, 2020; Hall, 2020). In this study, university adult-partners followed the leads of youth organizers, but did not engage youth in action-oriented research methods. This study more closely aligns with youth organizing; a youth development and social justice approach that provides young people with peer-led education and training on organizing and advocacy to challenge power relations and galvanize meaningful change (Hall, 2020). This model emphasizes peer-to-peer learning and collaboration, which corresponds to the youth-led sustainability summit and collaboration with adult university partners. Lastly, youth empowerment is defined as an increase in the capacity of youth to create change in their community and within adultist systems (Susskind, 2010). It is an ongoing process and extends beyond single events like the summit and includes developing knowledge and skills, critical awareness, strategic building, and leadership skills, relationship-building, and engaging in action (Susskind, 2010).

2.2. Disrupting Adultism as an Approach to Intentional and Meaningful Youth–Adult Partnerships

To disrupt adultism, youth and adults must work together to foster equitable relationships and approaches that challenge and mitigate adultism; such efforts yield benefits for youth including enhanced leadership skills, a stronger desire to contribute to community change, a greater sense of control over their lives and the world, and improved self-esteem and agency (7 YF Principles, n.d.; Hall, 2020; Watson, 2024). Youth insights and contributions should therefore be recognized as relevant and meaningful in the present rather than deferred until they have “grown up” (Aleks Mingsheng, 2022; Shaw-Raudoy & McGregor, 2013).

However, the degree of youth engagement in decision-making processes varies significantly, and adultism often constrains meaningful participation. Arnstein’s (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation offers a foundational framework for understanding these power dynamics, illustrating how participation ranges from tokenistic consultation to genuine citizen control. Though developed in the context of broader civic participation, Arnstein’s model has informed discussions on youth engagement, illustrating how adult-led approaches can reinforce symbolic or tokenistic inclusion. Building on this, Hart’s (1992) Ladder of Youth Participation provides another ladder framework to examine how institutions and professionals engage young people. Hart’s model has been instrumental in helping educators, youth workers, and policymakers assess the degree of authentic youth involvement in decision-making. The framework highlights the risks of adult-driven participation that inauthentically engage youth and calls for deeper more equitable forms of youth participation.

Karsgaard et al. (2022) build on these frameworks by situating youth participation within advocacy education, emphasizing the necessity of moving beyond prescribed, adult-controlled actions toward forms of engagement that allow youth to exercise agency in shaping social, economic, and political conditions. Drawing on Botchwey et al. (2019), Karsgaard et al. critique projects that position young people as passive actors whose participation serves predetermined outcomes—often designed for behaviour management or individual development rather than systemic change. Instead, genuine advocacy requires an ethical commitment to shared power, where youth take space for themselves and engage adults as partners in change. By conceptualizing advocacy as a transitional rung between consent and full incorporation in decision-making, Karsgaard et al. challenge educators to design learning experiences where youth advocacy is not merely an exercise in civic engagement but an authentic means of challenging injustice.

As such, disrupting adultism requires shifting power within decision-making to value the knowledge and skills of young people and centre youth lived experiences in decisions, policy, and actions (7 YF Principles, n.d.; Aleks Mingsheng, 2022; Students Commission Canada, 2023). Authentic engagement, where youth have power (citizen control vs. delegated power (Arnstein, 1969)) also disrupts adultist processes that tend to reward compliance and adherence to predefined “youth” roles, marginalizing or pathologizing youth who challenge the status quo or critique existing systems of power (Liou & Literat, 2020). Interrupting adultism also requires valuing and integrating youth capacities and literacies into educational frameworks and climate change discourses.

In summary, Y-APs are most meaningful when adults actively listen and affirm youth experiences, educate themselves on relevant issues before intervening, support youth in pursuing personal and professional growth, contribute specialized skills or knowledge to advance youth-led goals, and act in solidarity with youth and youth movements (Liou & Literat, 2020). This includes recognizing the unique expertise youth activists bring and amplifying the cultural and creative dialogues they lead (Bowman & Germaine, 2022). Table 1 outlines several examples of intentional and meaningful Y-APs in Canada, aligned with levels of youth participation and power. The youth–adult partnership detailed in this study took place in Ontario, Canada, and as such, we selected examples in similar socio-political contexts to understand the background of Y-APs and their relevance.

Table 1. Select examples of Intentional and Meaningful Y-APs.

Youth Movement/ Program Example	Details	Level of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992)
Quebec Student Movement	During the student-led strikes in response to the 85% tuition hike in Quebec, there were both positive and negative experiences of Y-AP (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2013). Many of the approaches of the student-led strikes involved youth-organizing techniques involving training camps with workshops and education, mentoring, and peer-led transformation partnerships and education (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2013). The university, political, and societal authorities responded negatively to the actions led by the students and as a result, youth were infantilized, criminalized, and brutalized (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2013). Blanchet-Cohen et al. contrasted the experiences of the students leading the strike to the researchers’ conducting studies on the strike and its effects. The adult researchers found that by generating and sharing knowledge on the strike and the students taking to the streets, that they helped to uplift the youth voices and shift some of their power, credibility, and voice to the youth (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2013).	Citizen Control—The youth created and led the activist movement against the 85% tuition hike, and adult partners followed their lead, using their roles and voices to amplify existing actions led by youth.

Table 1. *Cont.*

Youth Movement/ Program Example	Details	Level of Citizen Participation (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992)
4H Youth Agricultural Program	The 4H agricultural youth program provides many strong examples of youth-led and Y-AP work. One study looked at the success of Y-AP in organizing a youth leadership summit (Schmitt-McQuitty, 2007). In this example, the adults supported youth by helping them connect with community service professionals, obtain funding, and organize the logistics of the summit, and the youth led the process and planning of the summit (Schmitt-McQuitty, 2007). During the partnership process, they clearly outlined and differentiated the roles of the youth and adults and defined how they would work together towards their shared goal of carrying out the summit (Schmitt-McQuitty, 2007). The youth explained that they felt that the Y-AP strengthened their ability to organize the summit. The trust and belief that the adults had in their skills and their offerings of support and resources facilitated an empowering experience (Schmitt-McQuitty, 2007). Another example of impactful Y-AP was in the 4H food smart families program where youth were engaged in roles as teachers within the program (Weybright et al., 2016). This teen teachers program had many positive developments for youth and improved their sense of belonging, independence, generosity, and personal growth including their experiences of connection, competence, confidence, character, compassion, and contribution (Weybright et al., 2016). In this Y-AP example, the components that made it meaningful were the mutual respect between youth and adults, the opportunities for youth to lead and teach, the adults acted as supportive mentors and coaches, it fostered relationships and friendships among the adults and peers, there were shared responsibilities but the youth also had independence and autonomy when they were teaching (Weybright et al., 2016)	Delegated Power—The 4H agricultural youth program is grounded in the 4H organization that is adult led; however, the youth were given the decision-making and execution power of the youth leadership summit and the adult partners provided services and help navigating the bureaucratic institutions that led to a successful summit.
Gay-Straight Alliances	There are many impactful examples of youth–adult partnership in the history of Gay–Straight Alliances that were formed in the early 1990s. In one example given by Evans & Lund looking at youth–adult collaboration in the development of a GSA in the conservative small town of Red Deer, Alberta, adults served an important role in safeguarding the safe space for youth and challenging the systemic and social inequities that the youth were facing. This work exemplified that youth aren’t helpless and are very capable of self-organizing, but that they do benefit from having adult help to navigate the social, political, and institutional systems they live in (Evans & Lund, 2013), which is illustrated through the challenges youth face in navigating bureaucratic procedures to contribute to the decision-making on issues like climate change.	Citizen Control—The youth approached the adults for their support in creating Gay–Straight Alliances, but the development of the groups was youth-initiated.

2.3. Youth–Adult Partnerships Critical for Transformative Change

For the purpose of this study, “transformative change” refers to profound shifts in societal systems and structures that move beyond incremental improvements. It requires fundamentally rethinking and reconfiguring power dynamics, relationships, and approaches to environmental and social issues in ways that are equitable long-lasting, multi-voiced, and multi-actor formations (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015).

In this context, transformative change can be driven by intergenerational partnerships. Youth and early-career professionals can bring interdisciplinary backgrounds, fresh perspectives, and innovative ideas that help generate novel solutions to complex global challenges, like climate change (Jeunesse Acadienne, 2017; Lim et al., 2017). Intergenerational relationships and empathetic dialogues are critical in the building of communities that are collaborative, equitable, resilient, and culturally responsive to more stabilized fu-

tures (Hayes et al., 2023; Susskind, 2010; Zurba et al., 2020). Intergenerational partnerships can help foster transformative change by bridging youth creativity in imagining possible futures and better worlds, adult capacities for implementing change, and seniors/elders' abilities to bring in their lived experiences and provide insight on plans of action (Kennedy & Gislason, 2022; Zurba et al., 2020). These intergenerational collaborations are more likely to lead to solutions and action that are more meaningfully integrated across sectors and grounded in equity-focused approaches (Kennedy & Gislason, 2022).

Therefore, climate and environmental policies and frameworks should integrate official and continuous mechanisms for intergenerational dialogue, collaboration, and co-learning within their processes and actions (Zurba et al., 2020). Youth-led activist movements often inspire greater positive change than their adult counterparts because they are more open to collaboration and listening and learning from each other's experiences (Liou & Literat, 2020). Climate strikes led to transformative literacies that work to transform communities by improving the conditions and participation of community members in making changes happen by supporting solidarity and relationship building among members (Bowman & Germaine, 2022). The youth climate movement is grounded in visions that integrate climate and social justice, advocating for systemic change and standing in solidarity with movements such as Black Lives Matter. It places strong emphasis on anti-racism and decolonization (Grewal et al., 2022; Elsen & Ord, 2021). In this study, we drew on literature connected to social justice and Y-APs to respond to the intersectional focus of youth organizers.

This is illustrated in Larocque's (2023) explanation of the theory of social-ecological transition in the context of youth climate organizing. This theory demonstrates climate change as a systemic issue that is influenced and interconnected within social processes, exemplifying the inextricable link between environmental and social justice issues (Larocque, 2023). In contrast to past models of socio-ecological transition, the youth eco-activists centred the socio-cultural pillar as the more integral component of socio-ecological transition, particularly highlighting intersectional climate justice, intergenerational solidarities, and place-based connections wherein almost all social and environmental causes can be linked together by their roots in the same colonial, capitalist, racist, homophobic, ableist, and extractivist system (Larocque, 2023). We have addressed the positive benefits of Y-APs in this section thus far, but Y-APs are not always positive and can reinforce adultism and disempower young people.

2.4. Disempowering/Harmful Youth–Adult Collaboration Practices

Adults and older generations are more likely to act within the status quo, adhering to existing power structures; whereas, youth tend to resist incremental change and push for transformative change (Clay & Turner, 2021). Youth experiences of structural and systemic inequities and the challenges that they face in enacting change within a society may lead to feelings of hopelessness and burnout (Nairn, 2019). Many young people report feeling a disproportionate burden to address climate change due to what they perceive as widespread societal negligence (Nairn, 2019). The work itself can be emotionally and physically exhaustive as climate activism is frequently experienced as unending and all-consuming (Gorski & Chen, 2015).

Interpersonal dynamics between youth and adults can lead to disempowering or harmful interactions. Decision-making spaces typically reflect adult-centric structures that can alienate, discouraging collective organizing and action among youth and between youth and adults (Aleks Mingsheng, 2022). Youth may also struggle to navigate logistical barriers such as accessible meeting formats, incompatible communication styles, and transportation or scheduling limitations. (Weybright et al., 2016). Moreover, adults may

rely on corporate or technocratic language that can obscure or undermine youth visions for justice and change and dilute the potential for more radical, systemic change (Clay & Turner, 2021). To build inclusive and supportive spaces, cultural sensitivity and anti-oppression training for all youth and adults involved in a partnership will improve the accessibility and safety of the space (Arokiasamy et al., 2023). Without this, poorly executed Y-APs can reinforce and reproduce paradigms where those who have less power are silenced and tokenized (Clay & Turner, 2021). The generational divide, particularly evident in the context of climate activism, can perpetuate adultist and colonial dynamics that undermine meaningful intergenerational collaboration (Lam & Trott, 2024). In contrast, many Indigenous practices integrate all generations, valuing contributions of community members of all ages in environmental care and ways of knowing (Lam & Trott, 2024).

Misconceptions about youth further inhibit equitable collaboration. Young people are often dismissed or punished when their activism challenges societal norms, and they are frequently stereotyped as naïve or irrelevant (Bell, n.d.; Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2013; Ayalon & Roy, 2023). These attitudes, compounded by a lack of genuine respect for youth perspectives, can result in condescending or belittling treatment.

Finally, seemingly empowering forms of inclusion can be superficial. Tokenizing remains prevalent in climate organizing spaces, where a few individual youth are expected to speak on behalf of their entire generation. This isolates young participants and contributes to burnout, particularly when their involvement lacks real influence (Climate Strike, 2019). While youth may be celebrated as symbols of inspiration, they are often excluded from substantive decision-making roles (Aleks Mingsheng, 2022). Such performative inclusion reflects a deeper failure to recognize youth as legitimate agents of change (Susskind, 2010).

2.5. Y-AP Conceptual Framework for Youth Participation

Building on past models of Y-AP, Cahill and Dadvand (2018) developed the 7P conceptual framework for youth participation (see Figure 1). Past models of Y-APs and youth participation operated with the assumption that youth participation was a straightforward process that resulted in positive outcomes for youth by providing a voice for youth and opportunities to have agency that would ultimately lead to empowerment (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Lund & Beers, 2020). The 7P model accounts for some of the more complex and in-depth components of youth participation in decision-making to illustrate the components that are essential for developing meaningful youth–adult collaborations. The 7Ps are purpose, power relations, perspectives, position, protection, process, and place (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). The 7P model is applicable when considering youth–adult collaboration for a specific initiative, program, or research project and supports adult allies in examining their own preconceptions and assumptions to encourage positive adult partnership (Barg, 2022). Following Thew et al. (2022), who revised the 7P framework and recommended a consideration of psychological factors in the Y-AP, we have integrated that into the research design.

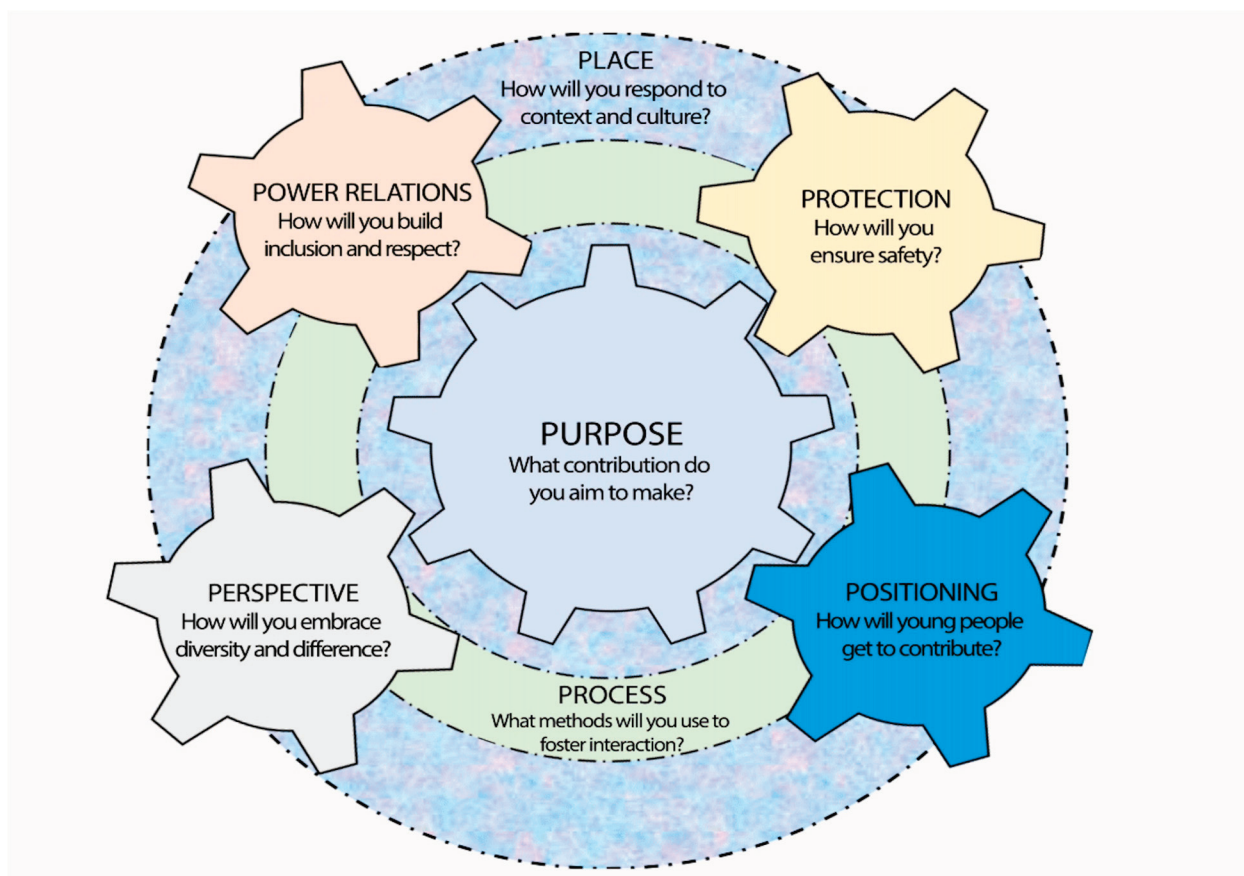


Figure 1. Cahill and Dadvand (2018) 7P framework: a thinking tool for visioning, planning, enacting, and evaluating youth participation.

3. Methodology

Study Context

This research focuses on an Environmental Youth Council [EYC] and a summit they organized with support from adult-partners at a local university in Canada. The EYC is a youth council made up of representatives from three regional high schools. While the council operates independently, its president serves as a liaison by attending the adult board meetings of the larger ENGO with the same name, ensuring youth perspectives are integrated into organizational decision-making. The EYC took the lead in planning and executing a one-day event in spring of 2022, with support from the adult board. The summit was attended by 185 high school students from regional high schools, while adult partners at the university provided mentorship, logistical support, and funding. University partners facilitated bi-monthly check-ins in the first six months with EYC members and bi-weekly meetings in the last six months leading up to the summit. The university partners assisted with administrative processes and ensured the youth retained decision-making power. At the EYC's request, teachers attended separate professional development workshops, allowing students to fully engage in youth-led discussions and activities.

This study follows a qualitative research design using focus groups to explore youth perspectives on youth–adult partnership and responsive educational approaches for addressing climate and sustainability challenges important to young people. The youth participants aged 16–19 from the EYC were invited via email to participate in a 90 min focus group, reflecting on their experiences organizing the youth-led sustainability summit and working with adult partners. These youth intensively worked together as a team to organize and run the sustainability summit; therefore, interviewing the team as a group

was appropriate to hear their collective reflections on their experiences. Seven youth from the EYC were available, paid a \$40 honoraria, and all completed informed consent forms prior to participation. This study received approval from the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board.

Focus groups were conducted virtually via Zoom. The focus group centred on the primary research question: What is the nature and process of youth–adult partnership in creating participatory learning experiences that address climate and sustainability challenges? Specifically, youth were asked questions on lasting impressions of the summit, experiences in working with adults on climate projects, in what ways or where have they experienced effective Y-APs, description of qualities or processes that have created conditions for an effective Y-AP, and recommendations to adults on how to work with youth. Audio recordings were transcribed, and participant confidentiality was ensured. Data was analyzed through thematic inductive coding to develop an iterative coding tree related to salient themes (Miles et al., 2020). One of the authors was directly involved as a university partner supporting the EYC and attended meetings, while the other was not directly engaged with the EYC or the summit coordination. To mitigate bias, the author not involved in the partnership took the lead in data review and analysis, creating a more balanced interpretation of youth perspectives. After the initial coding process or first cycle of coding using Dedoose, the research team engaged in collaborative discussion to further interpret and synthesize the data. This inductive phase was then followed by a second deductive phase of applying the codes to the 7P framework (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018), synthesizing theory with youth perspectives from which an adapted 7P framework has resulted. To ensure consistency in coding, both researchers independently applied the codes to the 7P framework and compared interpretations. A summary of findings was circulated to participating EYC members for review.

4. Findings: Applying the 7P Framework

In this study, we applied the 7P framework to understand the processes and experiences of youth in the EYC group as they collaborated with an adult-led organization to co-develop a sustainability summit for high school students in their region. We begin by outlining the components of the 7P framework developed by Cahill and Dadvand (2018) and integrate findings from other studies that have applied this framework to Y-APs. For each domain, we detail how youth perspectives from focus groups aligned with these elements. In the Discussion section, we present an adapted 7P framework based on this synthesis to respond to the context of Y-APs in climate justice organizing—specifically focusing on the urgency of action on the climate crisis, and the mental and emotional tolls of climate organizing on youth.

4.1. Purpose

A co-developed purpose can lead to youth experiencing a sense of ownership over the project, and ensure that the programs/campaigns are culturally, socially, and personally relevant for youth participating (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). There are two purposes that we speak to in the context of this study. The youth involved with EYC were involved in two Y-APs: one, on a short-term basis, with the adult partners at the university that supported their sustainability summit; and the other, on a longer-term basis, as the youth advisory council for a local environmental non-profit organization (ENGO) in their community. The shared purpose between the adult university partners and the EYC was to organize and host the one-day summit for high schoolers across the region to provide opportunities for education, engagement, and action on climate and environmental issues relevant to their communities as well as networking opportunities among youth and with environmental

professionals. The EYC and the local ENGO shared the purpose of supporting their city in increasing sustainability awareness and initiatives, a long-term collaboration. This sense of purpose with organizing the summit was shared by several youth organizers in the focus group: *“It was a formative experience for me. I’ve never really had a chance to be a part of something like that. . .on such a wide scale. . .I’m really proud of what we did”* and another youth shared *“I think that seeing almost 200 students from across a school board come together for one common cause was definitely. . .was definitely nice! I think we pulled it off decently.”* However, youth conveyed some confusion about how the youth council should work with the wider ENGO:

We would be receiving emails about every single thing that pertains to the Board, even though there’s 5 or 6 different working groups within the organization, and we are only responsible for the youth council. We were flooded with all of these emails that we didn’t know what pertained to us and what didn’t pertain to us. And then we would end up missing things that they were actually asking us.

4.2. Positioning

Within the 7P framework, positioning focuses on the ways that young people are understood and portrayed in society, and what is expected of them, i.e., their positioning. In the context of a Y-AP, this involves clearly outlining the roles of young people and considering how those roles relate to the adult partners in an effort to improve youth participation and engagement (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). For this research study, the sustainability summit was led and directed by the EYC youth, with adult partners offering logistical and administrative support through biweekly check-ins with adult organizers. Youth were responsible for determining content, coordinating with speakers, and managing the event’s flow. This structure fostered a sense of agency among youth, as participants reflected: *“We also got to have the chance to run one of the workshops. . .and I just really liked the experience of working with like-minded youth”* and another youth shared *“when we all met at the venue, and we were getting everything ready that it was actually going to happen, and seeing it all come together on the day of versus just an idea from the group that was really really cool.”*

Despite their leadership, some youth expressed feelings of stress and responsibility, particularly during the final stages of planning. As one youth described, *“The last two weeks, I was kind of afraid, because. . .being the main receiver of all the emails. . .was a little bit nerve-wracking.”* This sentiment highlighted the dual nature of their role: empowering yet challenging for them with their skills and experience. Additionally, the youth noted that the summit’s impact could have been amplified if its outcomes had been integrated into classroom projects, suggesting a missed opportunity to extend its influence with teachers:

think it would have been really good to see teachers become more directly involved with their students’ projects and taking what they learned at the summit back into the classroom, and actually trying to run sort of like a small-scale project in their school community, or their greater community with their class where their teacher is helping more facilitate it, because that’s what we were trying to teach the teachers at the PD day and while the students learned a lot there weren’t exactly projects that we saw coming out from the summit directly tied to it.

In the context of the EYC’s role as the Youth Advisory Committee to the local ENGO; their president sits as a full voting member on the ENGO’s board of directors, and is expected to participate fully in board meetings and decisions. The Youth Advisory Committee as a whole provides input and direction to the ENGO and brings youth perspectives to their work.

A common theme that came up regarding the EYC youths’ experiences as the Youth Advisory Committee for the local ENGO and within climate and environmental circles in general was:

one thing that sometimes can be found is the tokenization of youth in the sense that adults will use you purely for forwarding or furthering their agenda, and like making it seem to you that, you're doing what you need to do, and you're doing great, but once it really does get down to it they're really just using you as a prop for whatever they need to get done.

They also spoke to the fact that meaningful youth engagement is critical in the context of climate change, as

what is being planned today surrounding climate change might not be applicable in 30 years. In fact, it probably won't be applicable in 30 years and might not be applicable next year. So the concept of bringing youth into that discussion, I think, is really important, because we are going to make some plan moving forward for the future. The people who are going to be leading that plan, when it's most needed, should really have a say in how it's going just to ensure that it can still be functional, and it does still apply.

Overall, the position of the youth in their roles organizing in the climate space generally differed between contexts. In the context of the sustainability summit, the EYC youth were in a leadership role, leading the direction, content, and organization of the summit. In other contexts, however, including as the Youth Advisory Committee for the local ENGO, and more broadly, they have experienced tokenization and a lack of decision-making power.

4.3. Perspectives

In terms of *perspectives*, participants must account for the diversity of lived experiences and cultural identities that exist within groups and among individuals of young people (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). Taking perspectives into account includes actively working to meaningfully engage youth of diverse ethnic and racial identities, genders, sexual orientations, (dis)abilities, and socio-economic class in the work. In this research study, the youth organizers represented the executive leadership of the EYC, a group selected through internal nominations. The adult partner organization was approached by the existing executive of the EYC for support in organizing the summit. Throughout the planning of the summit, the EYC showed a strong commitment to including diverse perspectives within the summit's workshop offerings.

4.4. Power Relations

Power is relational, shaped by how individuals are positioned in relation to one another (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; quoting Foucault, 1980). When considering how adults and youth can collaborate intentionally and meaningfully together, it is crucial to address underlying power imbalances that often place adults in dominant roles. These dynamics may also exist among youth themselves, influenced by factors such as gender, class, ability, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and more.

In this research study, the EYC youth and the adult partners in organizing the summit operated with a balance of power and responsibility that were shared between the youth and the adult partners. However, given that the youth were leading the organizing process, they had to navigate interactions with adult professionals and social contexts, and they were met with some challenges. One of the youth shared that it was *"the first time I had ever had to work with any kind of professional before so emailing back and forth and I did planning with one of our workshop leaders as well, so that was an interesting aspect, working one on one with somebody."* The youth spoke of this as an empowering experience that they learned from and felt that they had influence over, but also experienced some challenges, for instance,

there were maybe some issues contacting people. Since I had one of our representatives to contact, there were some difficulties trying to get a hold of him and maintain a conversation. There was sometimes a long waiting period to get responses back. So I

think maybe given the fact that it was coming from a student organization, sometimes things do get pushed back a little bit just in terms of prioritization, but overall I think it was actually a very positive experience.

Conversely, significant power imbalances were evident in the youths' relationship with the ENGO board. Youth recounted feeling undermined and criticized by board members, particularly when their efforts were misinterpreted or dismissed. One participant described receiving an email that "*felt like a bombardment of suggestions,*" which exacerbated feelings of stress and burnout. As the youth explained:

It was like a very long email, pretty heavy-handed [from board]...And there's this long list of things that we weren't doing right according to the board and that we were like letting them down essentially. . . They were also completely ignoring all the work that had [been] done. And they were saying that we were ignoring money that they gave us and mismanaging it, and we were not coming to board meetings, and we were not being as active as they wanted us to be. The email ended saying that they had done a legal review and if things did not change immediately, they were going to think about dissolving the Youth Council out from under us.

In this case, the local organization misused their position of power to criticize and threaten the youth leaders, without considering the challenges they were facing in participating fully in the board's scheduled meetings.

Another youth reflected on how challenging it can be to work with adults and to be treated or feel themselves as equal:

So if you're working with an adult on a level that you're supposed to be equals, then decisions at some point need to be made as equals on both sides. I do think that the interactions often fall back into again, that school type, archetypal relationships between an adult and a young person that kind of lasts until you exit school and you have a job and money, and the money is a factor of it too, because you can't plan things without money.

Another youth reflected on their overall general experiences working with adults on climate projects:

For the times that I have worked with adults on projects, I think it's just overall been positive. I think the adults that work within climate change, or you know, sustainability usually are really supportive to youth, being a part of it as well and really encouraging. I felt that I've been treated fairly equally.

4.5. Protection

Youth experience some level of risk by participating in youth–adult relationships and community projects, as a result it is important to consider what *protection* is provided for them. Protection may exist in the form of legal protection in the case of direct action and activism, as well as ensuring there are policies and methods in place to address conflict that arises between youth and adults and among youth in groups. The collaboration for the summit provided a protective structure for the youth, offering financial, logistical, and emotional support. This support reduced the risk of burnout and ensured the summit's success, while also giving ownership, leadership, and decision-making authority to the youth organizers. As one participant explained, "*It's important for adults to help guide you through the process. . . allocating money for us to stay stable. . . really helps everyone out.*"

However, the lack of institutional protections became apparent in the youth's relationship with the ENGO board, as previous quotes have portrayed. The absence of conflict-resolution mechanisms left the youth vulnerable to undue criticism and unrealistic expectations, which negatively impacted their mental well-being and willingness to serve in youth volunteer positions.

4.6. Place

Youth participation within Y-APs occurs within numerous spaces/places. These may be virtual, physical, or social places. Taking place into consideration involves looking at how the spaces can be physically accessible to youth and how they might influence the comfort and willingness of youth to participate. The planning for the summit occurred on zoom and was coordinated based on youth organizers availability and breaks in their school day. The summit took place at a local university campus and included participants from diverse urban and rural high schools across the region. The in-person nature of the event during the COVID-19 pandemic posed logistical challenges, but the youth and adult partners successfully navigated these constraints. The board meetings for the local ENGO were either in person or on zoom and often were scheduled during times that the youth president had other extracurricular commitments and was not able to attend.

4.7. Process

The process refers to how youth participation and Y-APs are carried out, focusing on all stages of the project that youth are engaged (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). In the 7P framework, it is emphasized that it is crucial to consider what methods will most meaningfully and equitably engage youth (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018).

The summit's planning process was initiated by the EYC youth, who approached the adult partners at the university for support. Regular biweekly check-ins supported ongoing collaboration, during which adult partners provided resources and guidance as needed. The university's administrative staff also supported venue-related logistics, ensuring a smooth execution of the event. This is supported by the following youth reflections: *"I think that it's important for adults to help guide you through the process of doing things such as securing money for their projects, allocate money for us to stay stable, something like how the researchers at the university helped us with securing money for the summit. It's an effective adult-youth relationship in that case because it definitely helps everyone out" and "It was nice to have your opinion valued that way, because it's not often."* One other quote from a youth participant highlights how the youth felt they were able to minimize adultism, which may be related to supports offered through the university Y-AP, as follows: *"I think we did a good job in trying to minimize the amount that people would be unsure about us because of our age."*

4.8. Psychological Factors (Following Thew et al.'s, 2022 Recommendation for Inclusion in 7P Framework)

Thew et al. describe psychological factors as crucial in understanding how youth engagement and participation is stimulated, sustained, and played out in decision-making spaces in the context of youth attendance and participation in global climate negotiations. They identify that fear for the future, guilt, and other considerations motivate their activism and engagement in climate decision-making as well as the fact that that participation in climate decision-making led to burnout, frustration, sadness, distress, and emotional and physical tolls (Thew et al., 2022). In this study, the youth reported feelings of stress and burnout related to their organizing responsibilities and the subsequent conflict with the ENGO board they shared that they are *"overwhelmed by the amount of things set up for [them]selves"* and that they found similarly that, referring to their peers who were engaged in leadership and environmental activities, *"those students and those kids their schedules are beyond busy"*. The criticism that the youth received from the ENGO board led to them being *"a little bit shocked. . . expectations that they had for students were unreasonable"* coupled with the pressure of balancing school and extracurricular commitments, took a psychological toll on the youth. These experiences underscored the importance of providing emotional support and conflict-management strategies in Y-APs.

4.9. Positive Impact as an Addition to the 7P Framework

To build on the work of Cahill and Dadvand (2018) and Thew et al. (2022) on the 7P framework for Y-AP and contextualize the framework for climate related organizing spaces, we added an eighth “P” for *positive impact*. One of the most important factors for the success of a Y-AP in the context of this study was the meaningful impact and positive change that resulted from the summit, rather than youth engagement that was tangential or tokenistic. Since the original 7P framework (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018) was developed for engaging youth in health-related projects, the climate organizing space is a shift from a more individual health focus to collective climate action.

The youth reflected on the importance of supportive Y-APs to facilitate positive impact as follows: *“Adults often say that our generation is going to be the one to come up with the solutions for climate change. . . I think that the youth have really good ideas, and we’re the ones who are going to have to be living with it. So, by working together with adults, we can kind of use our ideas to get put into action.”* They also reflected on the roles of mutual respect and co-learning between adults and youth: *“Adults, believing that they have as much to learn from us as we do from them, and then putting that into practice, listening to our ideas, and then using their higher place of power, like in schools and stuff, to allow our voices to be heard, which proves that our voices are valuable and are being heard.”*

In contrast to facilitating positive impact, youth may also be tokenized and feel “used” in the context of their engagement in climate spaces. Youth participants shared their experiences illustrating that *“The tokenization of youth in the sense that adults will use you purely for furthering their agenda, and making it seem to you that you’re doing what you need to do and you’re doing great, but once it really gets down to it, they’re just using you as a prop for whatever they need to get done. It happens in the climate [space] and everywhere.”*

In Y-AP work for environmental and climate action, it is critical to also consider the broader context of the shared purpose. For youth to feel that their efforts are meaningful, there needs to be real impact as a result of their work (Climate Strike, 2019; Susskind, 2010). Fostering meaningful and impactful climate action through Y-APs not only empowers and builds skills and confidence, but also leads to more creative solutions, and facilitates co-learning among youth and adults (Kennedy & Gislason, 2022; Larocque, 2023; Lim et al., 2017). One youth shared, with respect to communications about climate change, *“I think when there is more collaboration, it’s greater quality, content, and greater ability to have better advocacy in regards to climate change or any other topic.”*

This study is a good example of disrupting adultism since the youth were given meaningful decision-making power and opportunities to lead the summit themselves, were viewed as knowledgeable actors by the organizational partners, and were engaged in teaching their peers about climate and environmental issues through their own experiences (Liou & Literat, 2020; Bowman & Germaine, 2022). They were also victims of adultism in the context of the conflict with the adult board as they were expected to adhere to the adult world and requirements for adult board members. This need for real impact and collaboration for specific and meaningful action was spoken to by the EYC youth.

5. Discussion

This study highlights both the strengths and challenges of Y-AP in climate organizing spaces. The sustainability summit organized by the EYC exemplified an empowering and meaningful collaboration, which highlights the potential of youth leadership when supported by an intentional Y-AP. After applying the 7P framework to youth reflections on the summit, it seems that the summit successfully fostered youth agency and demonstrated the importance of shared purpose, balanced power relations, and intentional positioning of youth within leadership roles but it was isolated to that one main event. However, in

broader contexts, such as the relationship between the EYC youth group and the adult ENGO board they worked with/for, showed persistent challenges. Suggesting that long term partnerships may come with challenges of tokenism, power imbalances, or psychological strain, if youth participation is not facilitated in intentional and respectful ways. It also may be simpler to integrate best Y-AP practices into acute collaborative events, and conversely long-term youth adult partnerships may be more complex to sustain over the long run. These findings also highlight the critical role of adult partners in offering logistical, emotional, and institutional support while respecting youth autonomy.

The study's results align with Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) 7P framework, and successful case studies of Y-AP in environmental and youth-organizing (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2013; Schmitt-McQuitty, 2007; Weybright et al., 2016), reaffirming the importance of shared purpose and balanced power dynamics for successful youth–adult collaborations. However, this study expands on the original framework by introducing critical considerations that reflect the lived experiences of youth in climate organizing spaces. First, the emotional toll of organizing efforts (Lund & Beers, 2020) highlights the need to integrate psychological factors (Thew et al., 2022) into the framework, to ensure youth receive adequate support to mitigate burnout and stress. Second, the importance of real-world positive impact emerged as a salient theme, reinforcing existing literature on the need to move beyond tokenistic engagement (Susskind, 2010; Bowman & Germaine, 2022; Aleks Mingsheng, 2022; Howell, 2023) and provide opportunities for youth to take leadership roles and direct adults and youth peers within Y-APs (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2013).

To illustrate these additions, we have adapted the 7P framework for the context of Y-APs in climate organizing spaces (see Figure 2). Most notably, we have reimaged the Cahill and Dadvand (2018) figure, replacing the gear motif with sunflowers, which are commonly used in climate justice work. Sunflowers were chosen as a symbol because as visual metaphors they more appropriately convey principles of interconnectedness, shared responsibility, collaboration and growth, whereas gears often symbolize mechanistic and transactional processes, which are not analogous with the organic, evolving, and relational nature of Y-APs or differentiated responsibilities.

This framework accounts for the shared and differentiated responsibilities between adults and youth, as well as integrating the value of meaningful impacts through the projects. In this updated model, we have highlighted that Y-APs should be authentically collaborative processes where youth and adults have equal roles in determining the purpose of the collaboration and projects, as well as the roles involved in the collaboration—shown with the overlapping petals for “purpose” and “positioning”. This adapted framework also builds upon established youth participation frameworks—Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, Hart's (1992) Ladder of Youth Participation, and Karsgaard et al.'s (2022) critique of adult-centric engagement. While earlier models emphasize degrees of participation and power-sharing, this adapted framework introduces additions grounded in the lived experiences of youth organizers, including the emotional toll of climate activism, the need for psychological support, and tangible outcomes of collaborations. We decided to depict responsibilities according to “adults” or “youth” because delineating roles helps address implicit power dynamics and these differentiated responsibilities of care and leadership will foster more intentional and effective youth–adult collaborations.

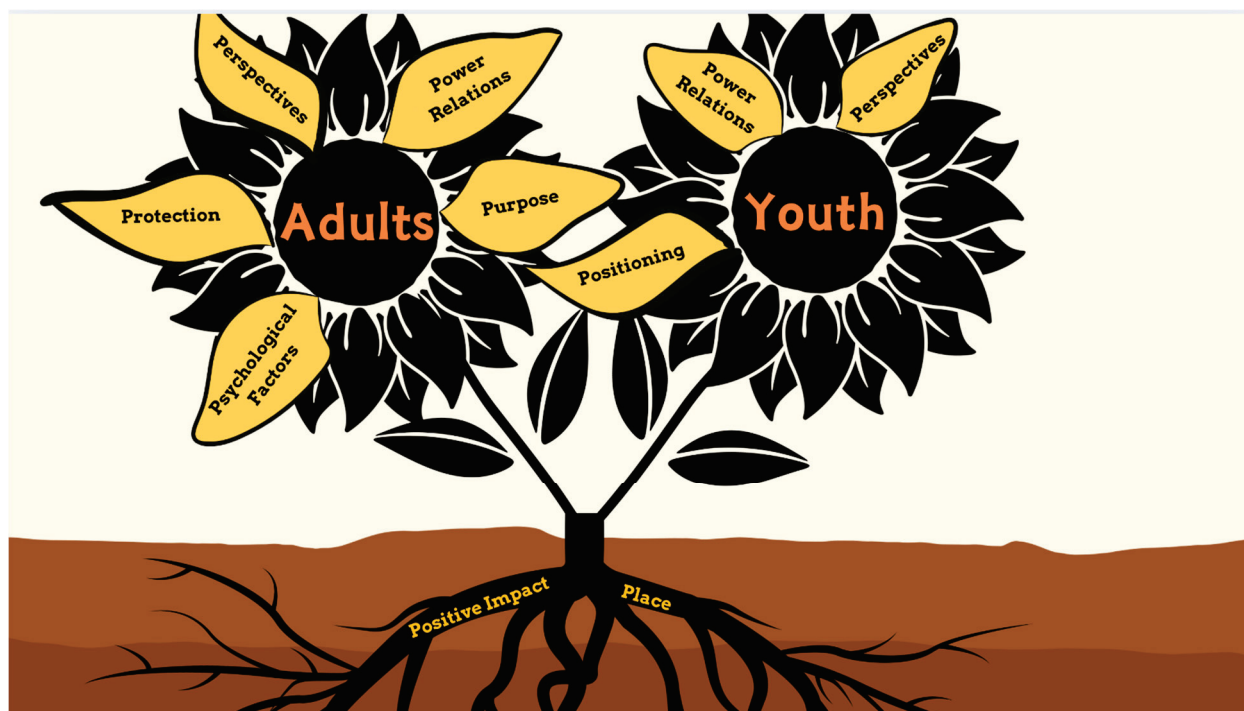


Figure 2. Adapted 7P framework for youth–adult partnership for climate organizing spaces.

There are, however, some responsibilities that remain in the hands of adults, particularly when it comes to protection and psychological safety. These responsibilities are illustrated in the sunflower (see Figure 2), where they appear only on the petals of the adult’s sunflower. Adults in youth–adult collaborations have a duty to ensure adequate protections are in place for youth—logistically, emotionally, and physically—through thoughtful planning, attention to mental health impacts, and creating safe environments. While youth also need to adhere to these protective measures, the onus falls more heavily on adults due to the inherent power imbalance. Adults must not only create space for youth voice and leadership, but also proactively mitigate potential psychological harms that may arise from youth involvement in advocacy and organizing. Power relations must be navigated by both youth and adults, which is why power relations are represented on both petals of both sunflowers. However, adults carry a particular responsibility to acknowledge and help balance unequal power relations, even as youth must also be attentive to how lived experiences and identities shape their roles within these collaborative spaces.

The power relations of age are evident when considering youth–adult relationships, however, it is also crucial to account for the systemic barriers that both youth and adults face in participating in climate organizing. Both youth and adults share the responsibility of ensuring that a diverse range of voices are included in the project or program. In some contexts, where a partnership occurs through a formal youth advisory council body, there may be times where the adults have more authority over what and when youth are invited to the table, and therefore have more responsibility to ensure there are diverse perspectives in the space. However, there are also decision-making spaces where youth may run or organize their own recruitment/elections into these bodies, and as such they would have more responsibility to ensure there is diverse representation.

Finally, a key gap in looking at the 7P framework in the context of Y-APs for climate justice organizing is positive/real-world impact. Throughout the findings in this study, as well as many others (Bowman & Germaine, 2022; Liou & Literat, 2020; Nairn, 2019), intentional youth engagement in climate work should involve a meaningful contribution to climate action efforts, whether that be through decision-making, organizing events,

or programming. Oftentimes, youth engagement is used to check a box and youth are disempowered by the lack of due consideration to their insight and opinions and feel that their participation was a waste of time (Augsberger et al., 2018; Clay & Turner, 2021; Thew et al., 2022). Intentional and meaningful Y-APs support youth to make contributions to decision-making and change making. Therefore, we placed the P's of positive impact and place at the roots of the sunflower to symbolize how these elements provide foundational nourishment—ground the partnership in meaningful outcomes situated within context and community.

To apply the 7P framework to climate organizing with Y-APs, we adapted Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) questions for each "P" in this context (see Table 2).

Table 2. Revised questions for 7P framework.

7P Value	Question for Consideration
Place	How will you respond to context, community, and culture?
Process	What methods will you use to foster interaction?
Protection	How will you ensure safety for youth considering intergenerational equity and honour the existential risks that climate impacts pose?
Positioning	How will young people get to contribute, and how will their contributions advance climate justice? How will the intergenerational partnership benefit youth?
Perspective	How will you ensure that all youth voices are present and accounted for in decision-making, uplifting those who are most greatly impacted by the climate crisis?
Power Relations	How will you foster a community of respectful, reciprocal, and equitable relationships?
Purpose	What contribution do you aim to make?
Psychological Factors ¹	How can you reduce the risk of emotional and mental harm to youth in the partnership? How can you support youth through their climate-related emotions?
Positive Impact	In what ways are youth ideas and perspectives integrated in meaningful ways to guide decision-making, strategy, and actions?

¹ Added in based on the recommendation of Thew et al. (2022). Thew et al. recommends replacing "process" with "psychological factors" as they feel that process is best described in the methods of research, rather than as a lens to consider and plan youth participation. Thew et al. describe psychological factors as crucial in understanding how youth engagement and participation is stimulated, sustained, and played out in decision-making spaces.

For additional literature on recommended practices for youth–adult partnerships see the supplemental file: Supplemental File—Recommended practices for Youth–Adult Partnerships.

6. Conclusions

This study underscores the importance of fostering intentional and meaningful Y-APs in the context of climate organizing. By applying and expanding upon Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) 7P framework, this research highlights the potential for collaborative initiatives to empower youth, support intergenerational co-learning, and result in climate actions. However, the findings also reveal persistent challenges, including youth tokenism, power imbalances, and the psychological toll on youth participants. Addressing these barriers requires adult partners to prioritize protections, balance power dynamics, and ensure that youth-led efforts focus on tangible climate actions.

The addition of positive impact, as an eighth "P" to Cahill and Dadvand's (2018) 7P framework, highlights the value of real-world impacts as a grounding element of successful Y-APs in climate organizing. This addition reflects the growing demand for authentic youth

engagement in climate justice initiatives, moving beyond symbolic participation to genuine collaboration that respects the lived experiences and expertise of young people, and that results in actionable outcomes.

Practically, organizations can use the revised framework as a planning and reflection tool, engaging youth in co-designing projects, evaluating their own engagement practices across the 8Ps, and building in safeguards to support emotional well-being and open communication. The sunflower model, and accompanying questions (see Table 2) can be used as a facilitation aid in training workshops or partnership-building exercises, to help map responsibilities, power dynamics, and shared goals.

This work offers a framework for cultivating transformative collaborations between youth and adults, grounded in mutual respect, shared purpose, and the pursuit of more stabilized and just futures, that are critical for responding to the threats of the climate crisis in turbulent times. Youth voices are key for developing transformative solutions to the climate crisis, and working with youth needs to be done intentionally, ensuring that they have agency and power to address existential challenges facing society.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/youth5030066/s1>: File S1: Recommended practices for Youth–Adult Partnerships.

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Article

Empowering the Collective: Redefining Youth Activism and Political Dynamics Within Nonprofit Organizations

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Abstract

This study explores the “nonprofitization” of youth climate organizing from the perspective of six youth activists who participated in designing a pilot environmental activism program for a large science museum located in Northern California. Through case study methodology, the authors explore how adultism and institutional control stifled youth activism and the ultimate success of their initiatives. Our analysis highlights the institutional practices, intergenerational value gaps, and inadequate understanding of social movement principles from the partner site that reified colonial hierarchies of knowledge and prevented genuine support and collaboration with youth in climate activism. Factors such as profit motives, a desire for control, generational gaps, and a failure to see youth as equals contribute to this problem. We conclude by proposing alternative institutional practices with youth that center on intergenerational power-sharing to counter the trend of nonprofit organizations greenwashing youth social movements.

Keywords: youth climate activism; epistemic justice; climate change education; coloniality; youth movements

1. Introduction

In recent years, youth activism¹ has emerged as a dynamic and transformative force in global social and environmental movements. Young people have led initiatives such as Fridays for Future, which have mobilized millions worldwide to demand urgent climate action (Wallis & Loy, 2021). Youth survivors of the Parkland school shooting started the March for Our Lives movement, shaping significant debates on gun control in the United States (Braun, 2019). Young people are at the forefront of local, national, and international movements—not only raising awareness of social injustices but also influencing policy changes, galvanizing public opinion, and redefining the role of youth in public discourse (Christens & Kirshner, 2011; Terriquez, 2014).

The impact of youth activism extends beyond the immediate demands of youth organizations. Historically, youth-led initiatives have been catalysts for broader societal change, challenging entrenched power structures and advocating for a more just and equitable world (A. M. Liou, 2022; Wilf, 2023). In the present political moment, young

people have further augmented their power and voices through creative political expression on the Internet. Memes, short-form videos, and other viral media content have emerged as potent forms of political commentary, often distilling complex issues into accessible and relatable formats that resonate with a wide audience (Yamashita & Robinson, 2016). These digital expressions have not only increased the visibility of youth-led movements but have also disrupted traditional media gatekeeping, allowing young people to set their own terms for generational discourse and reach global audiences directly (Alcantar, 2022).

Despite this, educational institutions and nonprofits have attempted to co-opt, tame, or outright suppress youth resistance (Mirabella, 2022). For example, schools and universities have enforced policies that discourage political expression, from dress codes banning protest symbols to expulsion for student participation in anti-war protests (Wood, 2025). In the present political moment, the second Trump Administration is weaponizing xenophobic “outside agitator” narratives to demonize student activism and free speech on college campuses, using executive powers and militarized violence to repress, surveil, and retaliate against young activists (ACLU, 2025).

Nonprofits, while operating programs that serve as crucial third spaces for compulsory school-aged youth (Cohen, 2024), have played a role in diluting the radical demands of youth movements to fit within more palatable or fundable frameworks. The “nonprofitization” (Kwon, 2013) of youth social movements has stifled young activists’ genuine expressions and political beliefs, as institutions exert financial and creative control over youth-led initiatives and programming (Atkins et al., 2020). Nonprofit organizations frequently equate “youth leadership” and “youth empowerment” with participation in duty-based citizenship practices or job-training programs that celebrate youth as a would-be workforce (Kwon, 2013). The neoliberalization of nonprofit organizations due to their reliance on private donors, corporate funding, and governmental grants is fundamentally at odds with counter-hegemonic youth activism, which necessitates youth agency, resistance, and power.

Adult-led nonprofit institutions frequently cannot and do not fully support or understand the goals and principles of youth movements, leading to a disconnect between institutions’ goals and youth visions within programmatic settings (Gordon, 2021). This trend raises important questions about the role of nonprofits and educational institutions in youth-led activism. As such, this study examines the experiences of six youth activists who participated in designing a pilot environmental activism program for a large science museum in Northern California to explore the following research questions:

- How do adult-led nonprofit organizations impact the autonomy and effectiveness of youth-led climate activism initiatives?
- How do adult-led nonprofit organizations’ institutional practices or policies impact youth agency and learning?

1.1. The Politics of Youth Activism

Young people who engage in activism are often “regarded as a raw force to be harnessed and disciplined on a pathway into responsible democratic civilization [and] democratic adult citizenship” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 10). However, youth who engage in organizing and activism “theorize and enact their own theories of change, producing alterneity” (A. M. Liou, 2022). When adults attempt to make sense of youth activism using dominant theories of change— even if those theories are “socially progressive” or “socially just”—they often erase the agency and political autonomy enacted by youth through their resistance and actions (A. M. Liou, 2022; A. Liou & Literat, 2020; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Furthermore, when adults romanticize youth organizing and valorize young people for resisting in a way that aligns with their adult theories of change, these analyses are

reductive, incomplete, and often reify adult–youth power dynamics through “totalizing” narratives of youth (Fine, 2014).

Within organizing spaces, youth activists also experience age-based power dynamics and struggles at the hands of adult “allies” (Gordon, 2007, 2009; Taft, 2015). Adults often attempt to regulate what qualifies as “political” and “legitimate” in both digital and physical forms of activist participation. Youth activists note that adults are prone to theorizing youth activism around a “discourse of exceptionality” (Gordon & Taft, 2011, p. 1506) or judging youth organizing based on their own “idealized cultural image” of activism (Clay, 2012, p. 10). Additionally, due to legal restrictions based on age, adults often “create the spaces, facilitate the conversations, and dictate the distribution of material resources for youth” (A. M. Liou, 2022).

Younger activists regularly identify the adultism of older activists as an inhibiting factor in their activist praxis (Clay, 2012; Gordon, 2009; A. M. Liou, 2022; Taft, 2011). In intergenerational organizing spaces, they articulate a critical tension between adult and youth organizers and express that they are often developing their activist identities in relation to the adult–youth power dynamics that manifest in their social spaces (Gordon, 2009; Taft, 2011). Youth activists “not only see themselves as different from adults for reasons of age and generation, but they also suggest that these differences [make youth] more effective” in certain aspects of activism and organizing, such as giving each other the time and space to explore their ideas, visions of justice, and identities and at collaboration (Taft, 2011, p. 61).

Youth activism, therefore, is necessarily shaped by adultism, or “the oppression experienced by [...] young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced/adult-tailored systems” (LeFrançois, 2014, p. 47). Young people exist in and between many “sites of control” (Boggs, 2011, p. 141), where they are controlled by adult actors and systems of domination. The social construction of youth as categorically “in process” and oppositional to adulthood also defines how young people are educated, punished, parented, and legally understood in our society (Lesko, 2001). Adultism demands and rewards youth obedience while simultaneously pathologizing youth critique and rebellion, which reifies power dynamics between young people and adults (A. M. Liou, 2022).

1.2. The Nonprofitization of Youth Activism in the U.S.

In the U.S., dominant notions of “youth” have historically been shaped by white, “middle-class, reform-minded adults” who sought to create an ideal childhood through institutional frameworks (Lombard, 2005; Illick, 2002). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, amid rising immigration rates and challenges to race-based citizenship, these adults addressed their social anxieties around race and class through reform efforts targeting youth of color, immigrant youth, and working-class youth (Kwon, 2013). Progressive-Era social reformers established the first juvenile courts and created various interventions and programs aimed at “delinquent” youth, believing that exposure to white, upper-middle-class values would “civilize” children with historically marginalized identities (Kwon, 2013; Lombard, 2005). As a result, the framing of immigrant youth, working-class youth, and youth of color as subjects of suspicion and regulation became enshrined in institutional policies and objectives.

As the field of youth development emerged, scholars and practitioners alike created programs reifying youth as objects in need of social control, creating programs aimed at channeling youth into socially responsible futures. Nonprofit organizations, which had steadily taken over “areas of service which used to be provided by the [...] state” (e.g., education, health, poverty, youth policy), aligned with youth development discourses that asserted that youth’s participation in their programs would improve individual and societal

outcomes (Deželan & Yurttagüler, 2021). However, since these organizations provided essential services and relied on private sector and governmental funding, they were both implicitly and explicitly discouraged from engaging in counterhegemonic political advocacy and, thus, radical social change (Deželan, 2023). Youth “participation”, “engagement”, and “voice” in nonprofit and youth development programs became intertwined with the private interests of foundations, corporations, and elites aligned to colonial power structures.

As the field of youth development emerged, scholars and practitioners alike positioned young people as objects in need of social control, creating programs aimed at channeling youth into socially responsible futures (A. M. Liou, 2022). Nonprofit organizations aligned with youth development discourses, asserting that their youth programs improve individual and communal outcomes (Ginwright et al., 2006). However, youth and their allies have critiqued youth development programs and nonprofit organizations for diluting youth activism and reifying the idea that youth agency results from participation in neoliberal practices (A. M. Liou, 2022; Kwon, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2014). In their view, these narratives bind youth action to conventional political participation such as “duty-based” citizenship practices, self-discipline, and obedience to larger structures and institutions of governance. Youth “participation”, “engagement”, and “voice” in nonprofit and youth development programs and are funded by foundations, corporations, and other organizations aligned with colonial power structures; thus, power still resides in dominant systems, and youth are trained to “sound and look like good citizens” (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

In *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, Allen (1990) discusses how liberal white philanthropic organizations, such as the Rockefeller, Ford, and Mellon Foundations, contributed to the suppression of radical Black liberation movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s. By selectively funding and promoting moderate, reformist elements, such as those advocating for Black capitalism and electoral politics, these foundations created a climate that marginalized and alienated more radical approaches to Black liberation. The nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC) similarly limits youth activism. The neoliberalization of nonprofit organizations has shifted institutional goals from public advocacy to market-driven “service provision”, subjecting youth in nonprofit spaces to restrictive and competitive funding, bureaucratic controls, and performance metrics that prioritize efficiency and palatability over authentic youth change-making (Deželan, 2023; Deželan & Yurttagüler, 2021). Furthermore, limited access to competitive funding prevents smaller, non-institutionalized youth movements from sustaining their efforts. As governments withdraw social services and impose financial and legal barriers on youth voice in the present, independent youth organizations face expulsion from policymaking, fear of retaliation for activism, and reduced access to sustainable resources (Christens et al., 2022; Deželan & Yurttagüler, 2021), while youth who participate within nonprofit programs related to “youth activism” face youthwashing (Frost, 2021), depoliticization, and reduced democratic participation (Deželan, 2023).

The nonprofit industrial complex significantly influences the radical possibilities of youth activism by imposing constraints that prioritize funding stability over transformative action. This dynamic not only limits the scope of youth-led initiatives but also exacerbates existing power imbalances between youth and adults in activist spaces. As youth activists continue to navigate these challenges, it is crucial to critically examine the role and restrictions that philanthropy and nonprofit institutions contribute to the landscape of youth activism in a colonial–capitalist system.

2. Methods

2.1. Context

In Summer 2023, Author 5 (Aleks) was hired by a large science museum in Northern California (Museum) to create and act as program manager for a new youth climate activism after school program called Climate Activists Regenerating Earth (CARE).² Authors 1–6 were six of fourteen middle- and high school-aged youth who applied, interviewed, and were accepted by the Museum to serve on its Youth Leadership Council (YLC), tasked with co-design, development, and leadership of the CARE program, with Aleks as Museum staff support.

The Museum's key demographic for CARE was local youth, ranging in age from 13 to 18, who self-identified as youth activists and were interested in engaging peers to take greater climate action and regenerate the natural world. The institution's intention in creating this program was to utilize its resources and reputation to connect young climate leaders with researchers, legislators, industry professionals, and community activists for intergenerational learning, skillshare, and co-creation of environmental solutions. Though secondary school-aged youth could participate in other Museum internships and volunteer programming, CARE was the Museum's first program that was youth-led and activism-specific; the Museum hired Aleks to fulfill the program's sole staff position, given their doctoral research and experience with youth organizing and intergenerational solidarity.

In order to ensure the approach to this youth program was guided by youth needs and interests, Aleks conducted 14 listening sessions with 45 individuals who self-identified as youth climate activists who had participated in environmental advocacy for at least one year. The purpose was to hear directly from youth about their needs and desires and to inform the program's shape. Youth in these listening sessions overwhelmingly (93%) reported interest in taking greater climate action than they currently do. Youth also shared that while there are climate-related opportunities visible to them at school, they often are unaware of options for taking their advocacy "to the next level, beyond volunteering" (youth participant). Furthermore, youth named adults as one of the biggest obstacles to their climate work due to expressed issues like gatekeeping, lack of awareness around youth interests, and limiting beliefs around youth abilities.

Across the board, youth who participated in listening sessions articulated that an "ideal youth climate program" would connect young people with each other across geographies and form a youth coalition dedicated to environmental awareness and action. According to youth, CARE should be youth-led and "less talk, more action", where youth leaders would (1) be in community with one another, (2) spend time developing a relationship with the natural world, (3) deepen their climate and biodiversity knowledge to better advocate for the planet, and (4) engage their peers and communities in taking collective action for the climate.

In order to ensure that youth would be the primary driving force of CARE and allow program goals to change dynamically year-to-year, Aleks proposed that the Museum create a Youth Leadership Council (YLC) to co-create strategy and lead program implementation with their support. In order to be selected for the YLC, each youth applicant, including the four youth authors, had to complete an online application that detailed their past experiences with climate justice and environmental advocacy, their experiences and challenges working within a group, and what they could contribute to the co-creation of a youth-led climate activism program at the Museum. The selected youth were then interviewed in a group setting by Aleks, where interviewees had to work with peers to create a climate justice event for teens in their local community. Of 37 youth who applied, 14 youth were selected for the YLC. Of the YLC's inaugural members, 79% identified as people of color, 64% identified as young women, and 21% identified as gender non-conforming or non-binary.

Additionally, 79% of the YLC were public school students, with 14% of the YLC attending private school and 7% being homeschooled. In total, 29% of YLC members qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Once selected, the YLC members attended a group orientation facilitated by Aleks to establish group camaraderie as well as their collective goals and community norms for the school year. Our initial goals for the year were to “help make [the Museum] more green”, “engage in disruption”, cultivate a large community and social media following, partner with local celebrities to raise awareness about environmental issues, etc. (see Appendix A). However, as we will explore in our case studies, several institutional obstacles, policies, and power dynamics hindered our ability to create the program as intended and be authentically responsive to youth perspectives and issues.

2.2. Participants

Participation in this study came at the premature conclusion of the program’s first year (2023–2024), after the Museum suspended CARE, disbanded the YLC, and fired Aleks due to our coordination of a youth-led protest in support of the Museum’s workers union (Case Study 3). As YLC members documented our experiences and perspectives of the year’s activities leading up to our suspension, we noticed patterns of greenwashing, neoliberal practices, and youth tokenization by the Museum that we wanted to explore and analyze on both a deeper and systemic level. With Aleks’s encouragement, we felt that there was value as youth to document our experiences and contribute directly to research about youth activism, as academic research about youth is overwhelmingly dominated by the voices of adult researchers.

Of the original fourteen YLC members, six chose to participate in the study (see demographic information in Table 1). The age range of youth participants was 15–18 years, with a median age of 17 years. Aleks, our sole adult participant, was 33 years old.

Table 1. Overview of participants.³

Participant	Age	Pronouns	Racial/Ethnic Identity	Activism Focus Prior to CARE
1	16	she/her	Multiracial, Filipino and white	climate
2	17	she/her	South Asian, Indian	climate change, marine science
3	17	she/her	Asian American, Japanese	environmental justice, marine science
4	18	she/they	Asian American, Chinese	climate, environmental justice
5	18	she/they	Asian American, Chinese, and Vietnamese	climate and social justice
6	18	they/them	White	environmental justice, educational equality
Aleks	33	they/them	Asian American, Taiwanese	Immigrants’ rights, racial justice

Reasons that the eight remaining YLC members did not participate in the study were 1. having alternate summer plans (e.g., job, camp, internship) (four youth) and 2. already being an inactive YLC member by the time of the study (four youth).

2.3. Data Collection

For the seven youth and adult participants, our intergenerational research meetings occurred on a weekly basis. We met virtually on Discord, as it was a digital platform that all participants were familiar with, and the digital component promoted accessibility for our group, which was geographically dispersed over a large metropolitan area in Northern California. For the first several weeks of our research meetings, Aleks created a short research curriculum so that all participants could establish shared language and knowledge; youth and adult participants read about a diversity of research methodologies as well as existing

academic scholarship on youth activism in preparation for our weekly, 90 min meetings. During the meetings, we summarized key takeaways from the readings, discussed individual reflections and connections to our YLC experiences, and took collective notes on how we would build upon or incorporate these ideas in our own study. All decisions made in the group were arrived at using consensus-based decision making (Taunyte, 2008) amongst youth participants, which was a community agreement we had established together during our YLC term.

As a result of our discussions, we decided our study would focus on our experiences as “youth leaders” at the Museum, the contradictions between the Museum’s expressed and enacted values, and how our experiences in CARE connected to systemic issues that disproportionately impact young people (e.g., adultism, the nonprofit industrial complex, repression of student activism). We decided that case study methodology would be appropriate for this study, since we could use our shared experiences to provide detailed, in-depth examinations of relational and structural power dynamics that we faced at a nonprofit educational institution, mirroring common challenges to youth activism in U.S. society at large.

The three case studies were unanimously chosen by participants through consensus-based decision making. Once we chose our desired case studies, our weekly Discord calls shifted to a new structure for data collection, focusing on one case study at a time. To begin documenting a case study, participants shared their personal account of that case, including reflections on key actors, chronology of events, supporting messages and documents from our YLC Discord server, and how the events impacted the individual’s personal activist identity, mental health, and understanding of CARE’s goals. We took collective notes on these reflections and then outlined components necessary to the case study at hand. Then, we engaged in collaborative writing on a shared document, where we “collaged” our accounts together to highlight overlapping facts and details. Throughout collaborative writing, we responded to each other’s contributions with comments, affirmations, and questions to encourage feedback. Time was reserved at the end of each research meeting to read through our collective account, ask questions of each other, and discuss whether our account was complete or needed to be worked on at the next research meeting.

It is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly given its demographic focus on a specific group of high school youth in a large, progressive U.S. city in Northern California. The experiences and outcomes discussed may not be universally applicable, as youth engagement can vary significantly based on the organization, context, and individual lived experiences.

2.4. Data Analysis

Our analysis consisted of three consecutive and iterative processes. First, we each examined the case studies and took notes, highlighting key quotes and developing brief summaries. Then, inspired by grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), we read across the data, identifying recurring conceptions and patterns, such as “youth tokenism”, “protecting institutional reputation”, and “control vs. agency”. Finally, by reflecting on the data as a whole, we coalesced these subthemes into three emerging themes related to youth activism and its tensions within neoliberal nonprofit organizations: core themes that illuminate the key challenges we faced as youth activists working within a nonprofit organization, specifically the institutional mismatch between expressed and enacted values; tokenization and control over youth; and limitations of adult policies in radical youth movements.

3. Case Studies

3.1. Study 1: Instagram and Logo/Adult Control and Restriction over Branding and Outreach

In order to effectively organize youth and engage our target demographic for CARE's first public event, the YLC wanted to create a social media presence on Instagram. However, according to institutional policies set in place by the Museum, individual researchers and Museum programs did not have proper authorization to create social media accounts because "unofficial" accounts could potentially impact the Museum's revenue and general image. Therefore, the YLC was barred from posting about our events, public workshops, and other science education and communication materials to social media and other youth. While the Museum offered to publicize our first event for us on the Museum's official Instagram account, they stated that the only way they could do so was using an Instagram story, a temporary post that only lasts for 24 h. The story they posted did not include the flier YLC designed, nor CARE's name, but instead pictures of youth of color unaffiliated with CARE. Afterwards, Aleks scheduled several follow-up meetings between the YLC and the Museum's Social Media division to discuss obtaining an authorized account, but our meetings were continually pushed back and, later, canceled.

Around the same time, the YLC was tasked by the Museum's Branding division with creating a logo for CARE, which we were told would be a contribution to the legacy of the Museum's first youth-led program. The YLC was told that we would not be able to decide the logo's color scheme or font face, due to Museum policy around institutional branding. However, the YLC brought its ideas within these constraints to an initial one-hour meeting with Museum staff to provide feedback about CARE's brand identity and mascots to inform the Museum's first draft. After more than a month's wait, the Museum shared three possible logos. None of them felt aligned with our vision, as they did not capture any of the direct feedback that the YLC had provided in our branding session. Multiple YLC members described the options as "juvenile" and "baby-ish".

The YLC compiled further feedback, including an illustrated mockup of our desired CARE logo, for the Museum. The Museum did not get back to us with an updated logo draft for five additional months. Despite the YLC's clear guidance and feedback, the presented logo was different from and more juvenile than the logo we had created. YLC members felt disappointed and unheard, since "we repeatedly attended meetings to give our opinions and ideas, yet none of them were applied". At the follow-up, we gave further, more specific critiques. However, by the end of our first year, we still had not heard further updates from the Branding division or received a finalized logo to represent the CARE community.

3.2. Study 2: Institutional Partnerships and Collaboration with Climate Polluters

In April, while we were planning a public Earth Day event for local youth and families, the Museum announced its sponsors for its annual fundraising gala. Sponsors for this event included PG&E, JP Morgan Chase, McKinsey, United Airlines, Visa, and Deloitte, whose collective carbon dioxide emission was 115.8 million metric tons in 2023 alone. Although the Museum claimed to have a mission heavily centered on regeneration, sustainability, and connection to the natural world, multiple members of the YLC felt that the Museum was negating that commitment by accepting donations and sponsorships from major climate polluters.

The YLC felt that this topic was an urgent one that we needed to address as youth climate activists affiliated with the Museum. We collectively decided that we would create and drop a banner with the names and logos of the top sponsors and corporate polluters invited to the event, featuring the startling statistics of how much carbon dioxide was released by these companies in the previous year. The message was tied together with

a touch of sarcasm, “Thanks to our sponsors” written above a globe encased in flames (see Appendix B). The goal of our action was to point out the discrepancy between the Museum’s expressed and enacted values in a manner that drew attention to the public and guests. We enlisted the assistance of several experienced adult accomplices who were willing to assume the risk of solidarity with us to carry out the banner drop, as youth under the age of 21 were not permitted to attend the fundraiser.

After much planning and coordination, our adult allies successfully dropped the banner and drew the attention of the attendees. People took pictures, possibly sharing what they had seen with their friends and asking questions about the “why” behind it. The banner stayed in place overlooking the donors’ dinner party for about fifteen minutes before it was taken down by security. No further known action was taken by the Museum to investigate the action, nor are we aware of any acknowledgement or accountability the Museum has taken with regard to the protest. While the banner’s impact was limited, we were able to successfully achieve our aim of addressing the Museum’s hypocrisy and create greater awareness regarding their expressed and enacted values.

3.3. Study 3: Institutional Retaliation Towards Youth-Led Action

In the spring, the Museum began facing structural budget deficits and its executive leadership decided to address this through staff layoffs and program cuts. The YLC grew concerned as we learned that several well-established educational programs serving youth of color were being cut. Many employees we had gotten to know and worked with closely were affected by staff layoffs.

The YLC began to plan our summer event, an Activist Bootcamp for fellow youth climate advocates to learn skills and movement history from experienced organizers. During our planning phase, we collectively decided that we should dedicate some of our time during this Bootcamp to support programs and staff impacted by the layoffs. We discussed that we could make a real impact on this issue at the institution if our voices were heard by the executives, who had often praised us for our commitment to leadership, advocacy, and action. Furthermore, as a youth climate collective, we continually examined the issue of climate change through a lens of intersectionality. Thus, the connection between the Museum’s budget cuts and its impact on youth, low-income communities, communities of color, and accessible science and climate education was relevant to the YLC and CARE’s mission.

When Museum workers decided to stage a solidarity break with staff impacted by the layoffs, the YLC attended with fliers we designed in support of the union. While Aleks attended the break with their colleagues, some members of the YLC placed fliers around the Museum. Aleks let us know to contact them if anything went wrong. One of our first locations was the Museum gift shop, where an intimidating man approached us and said, “Don’t do that”. As he was not wearing any apparent forms of identification, we did not realize he was Museum security staff until much later. We noticed some of our flyers were disappearing and assumed we were being followed, and a man who we believed to be Museum Security trailed us into a children’s play area. Alarmed, we ran to the nearest bathroom and locked the door. The situation, at the time, was described by the members present as “out of a horror movie”. We notified Aleks and then met up with them in our usual classroom to debrief the situation.

That evening, Aleks reached out letting us know that Anne, a senior Museum leader under pseudonym, would be contacting us by phone to inform us to not return for the rest of the program week. This was our first interaction with Anne despite being in the program for nearly a full year, and she called each of the YLC around 9:30 p.m. She told us not to come in for the rest of the week, without stating a specific reason for our suspension. Since

Aleks did not know the exact reason either and was told by Anne not to communicate with the YLC, the YLC was left in the dark. Obviously, we could assume the punishment was related to our flyering action, but Museum officials did not clearly accuse us of anything, and we did not think we were in the wrong, as none of our actions violated any clauses in the handbook we signed at the beginning of our program.

Anne's phone call made many of the YLC members nervous and put us on edge. The group mostly felt afraid and confused, while others felt justifiably upset because our programming was canceled without a clear conversation. The whole situation spiraled beyond our control very quickly and with little to no clear communication directly with the YLC to determine what happened that day before shutting the Bootcamp programming down. This created a disorienting atmosphere of confusion and doubt (see Figure 1).

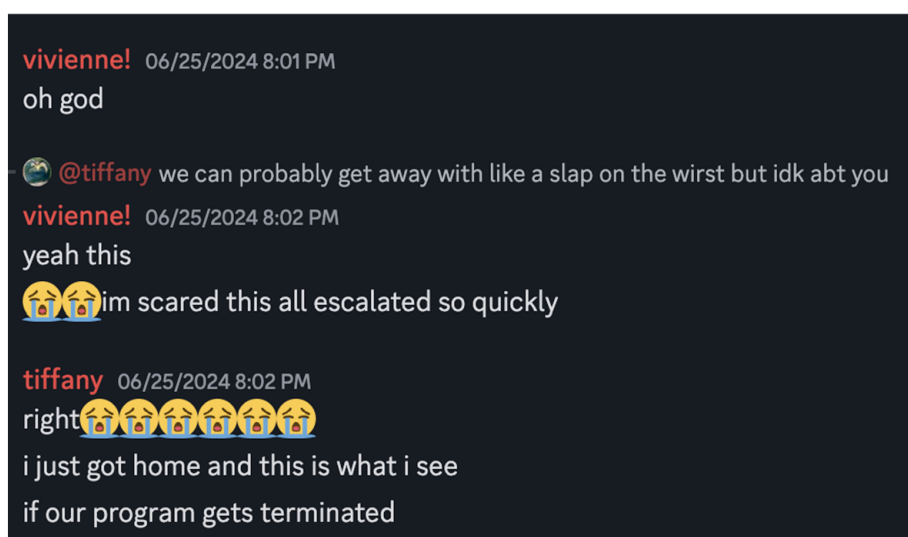


Figure 1. Transcript of YLC Discord conversation: YLC reactions to Bootcamp shut down.

Aleks was a strong supporter, and their main priority was assessing how the situation was making people feel and finding ways to address our fear and stress in order to help de-escalate (see Figure 2).

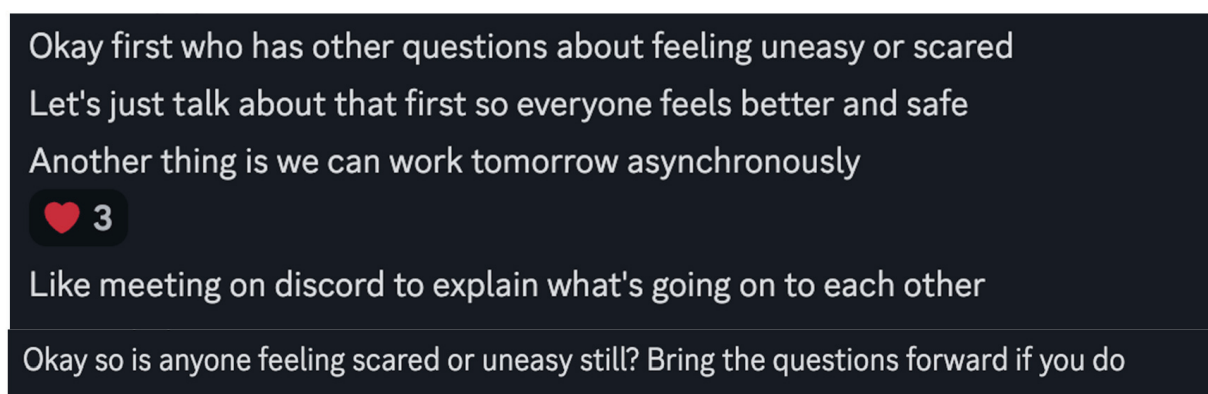


Figure 2. Transcript of YLC Discord conversations: Aleks's responses to YLC reactions.

The following day (Wednesday), the YLC held a virtual meeting on Discord and recorded our perspective of what happened the day before, so that we could establish our summary with a clear memory in case we were to be questioned. In the document, we summarized our experiences and connected them to earlier ones from throughout the program year to draw patterns of issues with power dynamics between the adults

we worked alongside. We explained how these experiences led to us deciding to spread the fliers.

On Friday, Aleks met with Museum management, who wanted to know the reasons the YLC, a youth climate group, would be taking action about workers' rights and layoffs. During the meeting, Aleks shared the YLC's document summarizing our perspective on the experience at the meeting, and the content in its entirety was dismissed as they repeatedly asked questions that were answered in the document. Aleks was told that "no one [at the Museum] is trying to retaliate against the youth or cancel their program", but rather that they were looking into whether Aleks was the one who convinced us to take action. The next day, Aleks was placed on administrative leave, and the Museum did not try to get in contact with the YLC to explain the future of our program and participation.

After the meeting, one YLC member sent the Museum leadership a letter of support detailing, and taking ownership of, the events that had occurred earlier that week on behalf of the YLC. By that point, it was clear to us that the Museum was going to blame Aleks for everything that happened, despite the fliers being our own autonomous choices; therefore, we wanted to explain to the Museum that these actions were taken of our own accord. A few weeks later, all YLC members and their parents or guardians received an email from Anne, describing that the Museum had hired a lawyer to conduct an investigation of Aleks' "supervis[ion] of the program" (see Figure 3).

My name is [REDACTED] and I am the Director of Public Programs and Academy Volunteers at the [REDACTED]. I'm writing with a short update and request related to your teen's participation in our [REDACTED] Program.

Unfortunately, we needed to cancel our [REDACTED] boot camp at the end of June. We made this decision because we are conducting an investigation of how our employee, Aleks Liou, has been supervising the program. Let me be clear: Your child is not in trouble and the issues we are investigating do not directly involve your child.

I am writing now because we'd like to learn more about your teen's experience with [REDACTED]. A lawyer, [REDACTED], hired by the [REDACTED] to conduct this investigation might email your child about their willingness to speak over Zoom. You are totally welcome to join your child in that conversation.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Because we are still investigating the [REDACTED] Program, I cannot provide much additional detail at this time. I will, however, follow up with you with more information after the investigation has been completed.

Thank you,

Figure 3. Email from Museum leader (Anne) to the YLC and parents regarding Bootcamp cancellation.

Although Anne said we were "not in trouble", multiple YLC members felt that the Museum's response of hiring a lawyer was an intimidation tactic. Furthermore, bringing our parents into the conversation made us panic, since not everyone on the YLC had an equally healthy relationship with their parents, and some families would be less understanding than others. Due to the power dynamics between a parent and child, the Museum's escalation of the situation became nerve wracking for the YLC, since much of a child's agency can be taken away at any time and reason for doubt by a parent.

The same day, the lawyer who was hired as an independent investigator emailed the YLC and their parents, asking to meet regarding "some concerns that have been raised [at the Museum]", without explaining why the meeting would be occurring, what the meeting would be about, or other relevant information for a youth participant (see Figure 4). Upon receiving this email mere hours after Anne's email, we were extremely confused and concerned as to why the Museum was taking such extreme action over distributing fliers without first talking directly to us.

I understand [REDACTED] has reached out to you letting you know that I will be contacting you. As you know, I've been retained by the [REDACTED] as an independent workplace investigator to look into some concerns that have been raised there. These concerns do not involve you directly; however, I understand your teenager may have some information that may be helpful and I would appreciate it if we could set up a time to speak via Zoom video conference. During our meeting, I will explain this process, my role in this process, and what will happen with the information you will provide when we meet. Your teenager's parent/guardian is welcome to attend this meeting. I encourage you to refrain from speaking with anyone about this process so as to avoid tainting this process or inadvertently engaging in retaliation among your peers or employees at the [REDACTED]. Your point of contact at the [REDACTED] is [REDACTED] if you have any questions or concerns.

Please let me know if you are available anytime on Monday, July 22 or July 23 between 1:30 pm and 5 pm. Please let me know what works best for you.

Figure 4. Email from lawyer hired by Museum to YLC and parents.

The majority of the YLC and their families did not feel comfortable attending these meetings. Some YLC parents were not fluent in English and felt uncomfortable responding to direct inquiries from a lawyer. Only two YLC members decided to participate in the meetings, which was an investigation of Aleks. One YLC member who participated in these meetings with the lawyer described their experience as an “interrogation” and less of a conversation. The meeting set a timeline of the events that occurred, while also asking leading questions that seemingly attempted to incriminate Aleks. Despite Anne’s promise that our parents would be updated with the outcome of the investigation, at the writing of this article in October 2024, YLC families have not heard from the Museum and are unaware as to the final decision that was reached during the investigation. Furthermore, we, the team of youth most directly impacted by this investigation, were never told the outcome and are still unaware of the future of the YLC and the CARE program as a whole.

4. Findings and Implications

Our interpersonal experiences of adultism at the Museum are symptomatic of the larger, structural manifestations of adultism present in nonprofit and educational institutions, where adults regularly determine what “counts” as leadership, participation, and activism for youth. Through our case studies, we have identified three core themes that illuminate the key challenges we faced as youth activists working within a nonprofit organization, specifically the institutional mismatch between expressed and enacted values, tokenization and control over youth, and limitations of adult policies in radical youth movements.

4.1. Institutional Mismatch Between Expressed and Enacted Values

Despite the Museum’s expressed values of “diversity”, “equity”, “collaboration”, “sustainability”, and “advocacy”, our experiences have made it clear that the Museum’s actions were not aligned with these values in reality. In each of our case studies, we illustrated how the Museum prioritized its image and revenue over its own values, volunteers, and staff. The most egregious of these examples to us is the Museum’s partnership with its fundraiser sponsors (Study 2). Despite the Museum’s expressed commitment to fighting climate change, preserving the natural world, and maintaining Earth’s biodiversity, it continues to accept donations from corporate polluters at the root of climate justice issues. This is a clear and direct example of greenwashing.

Apart from its climate-based values, the Museum also expresses the values of diversity and equity and youth empowerment. However, cutting programs such as teacher professional development, which brought science education to historically BIPOC and low-income communities across our region, was an example of the Museum acting in opposition to its expressed mission and values. When the YLC engaged in direct action to point out the Museum’s contradictions in this regard, our message and its connections to environmental justice were silenced or punished. The Museum’s actions in both recruiting

and suspending the YLC are indicative of an intentional co-optation of “youth voice”, “activism”, “climate justice”, as well as marginalized communities like youth of color. It is evident across these case studies that the Museum was more interested in securing its own reputational advantage for creating a “novel youth climate activism” program than it was in genuinely listening to and supporting youth activists.

Compared to how the Museum operates, we, as youth, have always collectively done our best to operate in a way that deconstructs hierarchies. We want equally elevated voices in the room. As a youth activist collective with a genuine core goal of justice and equity, the YLC created collective norms and values that centered youth voice, collaboration, solidarity with one another, and taking action for the planet (see Appendix A). We define our activism as “working with diverse audiences and movements in order to challenge the status quo and work collectively towards meaningful improvements in our communities”. We see ourselves as categorically different from the Museum for a multitude of reasons, but identify our alignment in expressed and enacted values as a distinguishing one. To us, any youth programming that claims to be “activist” must involve taking action on our values to challenge power dynamics and create material change. As youth activists, we are driven by intrinsic motivation and what we gain from social movements through coalition and solidarity building, while the Museum operates on extrinsic motivation, where factors such as profit influence their expressed versus enacted values.

4.2. Tokenization and Control of Youth

As activists, our views on environmental justice and activism require us to make an impact by speaking out and being unafraid to engage in uncomfortable actions to make change, without reputational or institutional restrictions. When the YLC engaged in more passive, surface-level activities such as “raising awareness” about issues understood by the general public (e.g., invasive plant species), the Museum celebrated us in their newsletters and fundraising campaigns as “exceptional youth leaders”. However, when we tried to move beyond “dutiful” dissent towards “disruptive” and “dangerous” types of dissent (O’Brien et al., 2018), we were punished, investigated, and suspended (Study 3). This made us feel like our purpose as the YLC was to create a program for youth tokenization rather than for genuine youth voice, action, and representation.

The Museum’s adults were the ultimate decision-makers that could unilaterally decide which types of activism and youth work were worth supporting and what types were under suspicion, worthy of investigation, or disciplinary action. Despite the digital space being an important site of activism for young people (Jenkins et al., 2016), the YLC was barred from using social media and not granted the “proper authorization to create an account” (Study 1). Museum adults had total control over how we presented ourselves to the public, our digital image, and whether we had a digital image at all. The Museum explicitly cited market-based interests and potential impact on Museum revenue as the reason for not “allowing” CARE to have a social media presence. Adult restriction on our contributions for the CARE logo also suggested to us that we were not fully seen as “youth leaders”, but instead, puppets. We felt that we were hired by the Museum to create an external image that the Museum was making an effort to work more closely with youth and was open to listening to diverse perspectives, when internally, this is not what we experienced.

When we were suspended as a collective in Study 3, the Museum did not consider the impact or consequences of abruptly pausing our programs on our partners, funding opportunities, upcoming speaking engagements and collaborations, or us as individual youth. Senior leaders had total decision-making power over how our actions would be viewed, interpreted, and punished and whether or not our program would continue,

without consulting or having a direct conversation with us. We believe that the Museum saw our actions as predominately orchestrated and executed by Aleks, which is a false and ageist perspective that sees our power through an adultist, individualist, and hierarchical mindset. This view does not recognize youth choices, actions, and lived experiences as legitimate forms of political critique.

Although the YLC was awarded a substantial grant in August 2024 to continue CARE for two more years, the Museum leadership still kept our program on pause and never reached out to update the YLC about their decision. Traditional nonprofit structures allow adults to unilaterally cut youth resources and funding without consultation of its affected members, meaning youth organizing is often limited by adult control rather than informed by community needs. In fact, our swift suspension as a collective and the use of legal intimidation to discourage our continued efforts is reminiscent of green lawfare tactics employed by corporations using “strategic litigation against public participation” (Konkes, 2024), taking legal action against environmental activists in order to discourage dissent and curtail protest rights (Singh, 2025).

4.3. Limitations of Institutional Policies and Structures on Radical Youth Movements

Museum protocol and policies often interrupted or fully prevented our organizing efforts. From social media to logo design to the Museum’s protocol for reprimanding Aleks, Museum leaders often cited policies that we were not made aware of prior to joining the YLC to limit our organizing capacity. Therefore, we advise that youth and adults who want to form horizontal structures for decision making within nonprofits co-write and -edit any policies that directly affect young people with youth. It is imperative that policies and procedures about youth must include discussion alongside us to ask whether these policies are relevant, supportive, or useful to us, particularly if we are expected to be “leaders” representing specific organizations.

Nonprofit organizations’ reliance on corporate and private funding can lead to co-optation and tokenism, where young activists are used for public relations purposes rather than empowered as genuine decision-makers (Covà, 2020). While youth organizations strive to cultivate leadership and influence, they often find their pathways restricted by the narrow interests of philanthropic funders, which can limit the scope of their activism (Christens et al., 2022; Terriquez et al., 2018). Traditional nonprofit organizations link youth “leadership”, “voice”, and “empowerment” with participation in neoliberal practices, such as obedience to larger structures and institutions of governance. Moreover, the NPIC can create a culture of compliance among youth activists, as youth navigate the expectations of adult partners and institutional funders; young people may be pressured to prioritize issues that align with funders’ or institutional interests over those that resonate with their lived experiences and aspirations because of their need for material support and resources (Conner et al., 2022). Funding landscapes can inadvertently reinforce existing power structures, as organizations may feel pressured to conform to donor expectations rather than pursue transformative change.

Our experiences fortify Kwon’s (2013) assessment that “the constitution of nonprofits [make them a] technology of neoliberal governance [which] severely limits the potential of oppositional political activism” (p. 5). Throughout our case studies, we articulated examples where we were expected by the Museum to participate in “youth voice” in particular ways that coincided with adult ideas of “sounding and looking like good citizens” (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Furthermore, in Study 2, we called attention to nonprofit partnerships with foundations and corporations that participate in the ongoing exploitation and extraction of workers and the planet. Having financial and contractual responsibilities with corporations

that do not share sustainability and environmental justice values limits the authentic “youth climate activism” that youth can participate in within nonprofits.

5. Conclusions

This study underscores the critical importance of establishing effective practices for engaging youth in meaningful ways, particularly within the context of programs created with the purpose of supporting youth activism. As youth authors, we explicitly highlight that the most effective approach to working with youth is to work alongside us as equal partners, rather than treat us as subordinates. This shift in traditional power dynamics allows youth voices to be heard, fostering innovation and creativity. By treating youth as partners, trusted adults and organizational partners can empower young people to represent our generation and make decisions about the direction of our goals and initiatives. Mutual respect is paramount.

Furthermore, the role of adults in youth-led work should be redefined to focus on facilitation and mentorship rather than dictation. This approach allows youth to take ownership of their learning and activism, as noted by Ramey (2013), who emphasizes the positive outcomes associated with youth involvement in organizational decision-making processes. In organizations that are genuinely youth-centered, adults should not occupy central or managerial roles. Instead, their position should be one of advising and supporting. When adults adopt a supportive rather than a controlling role, it fosters trust and collaboration, enhancing the collective experience. As demonstrated throughout our case studies, when Museum adults had the mindset of having “power over youth” in youth spaces, they took control of our group and its creative direction, despite their acknowledgement that CARE was youth-led. However, if an adult understands they are there exclusively to offer support to the youth, rather than dictate what youth should work towards and how they should approach it, youth can still learn valuable lessons from intergenerational collaboration while maintaining their autonomy as individuals and a collective. For example, when working with Aleks, we learned a lot with regard to seeking out grants and building a coalition. These were skills that we did not have, but something we were interested in, and our advisor offered to help us and teach us. There was no loss of learning in the adult taking a step back from the wheel, but rather, a deeper trust and bond was built between the youth as well as the group as a whole. Knowing that what we worked on would not be judged or disregarded, but truly valued and considered, helped us to put our best foot forward as a team and strive to make something great together. Adults can encourage youth to ask critical questions about their processes and aspirations without prioritizing their own opinion (e.g., “how would this work?”, “what might our process look like to reach this goal?”, “what do you dream of accomplishing together?”). Such an approach not only creates space for youth solutions but also fosters a collaborative environment where young people feel comfortable exploring ideas.

On a structural level, youth governance should be institutionalized within nonprofit institutions that “serve” young people; young people should have voting and decision-making power at every level of leadership that adults do within organizations that capitalize off of our intellectual, emotional, and physical labor (e.g., not only within programs, but also on financial, strategic, and vision-based decisions). In smaller youth-led collectives with adults in support roles, like ours, we advise that adults be excluded from voting privileges to ensure that youth retain their autonomy and are not influenced by age-based power dynamics in their decision-making. The adultism we experienced throughout our case studies suggests that adultism is a system of oppression that upholds and serves market logics; therefore, youth governance and tangible decision-making power is necessary

in intergenerational organizations to support the radical aims of youth and democratic, educational goals of public learning institutions like museums.

We recommend that individuals and institutions working alongside youth make intentional time and space to co-create and regularly revisit institutional policies with youth. Regular check-ins for consent, especially concerning the use of youth's media and images, are vital for ensuring that youth feel safe and respected in their participation. We believe that institutions should allow youth the right to withdraw their consent from institutional agreements if violations of trust and harm have occurred between youth and the institution. This practice is supported by the work of Zeldin et al. (2014), who argue that successful youth–adult partnerships emphasize shared decision making, which significantly impacts youth belonging and community building. By actively involving youth in the co-creation of policies and practices, organizations can foster a culture of inclusivity and respect that enhances the overall effectiveness of their programs.

Philanthropic organizations, grants, and donors who have financial resources and expertise can create youth-only funding opportunities to enable young leaders to fund their projects autonomously while fostering accountability by working directly with youth. Rather than operating through a nonprofit “middleman”, funders can directly finance youth projects that align with their specific philanthropic interests and connect youth organizations to needed resources. This supportive role enables youth to take the lead, fostering our growth and development in useful skills like budgeting, finances, and grant writing, without undermining our autonomy or the need to spend additional resources on adult salaries and overhead.

The urgency and importance of this work is further underscored by the actions of the second Trump administration, which is cutting federal funding to K-12 and higher education, diversity and equity initiatives, and other fundamental resources for youth (ACLU, 2025). As young people who are navigating overwhelming confusion, uncertainty, and fear over our shifting body of human rights and civil liberties, we underscore the need for safer spaces (Kelley, 2024) that authentically respect and support the development of youth, our voices, and our futures. The history of social movements has shown that direct action, coalition building, and solidarity are fundamental components of challenging oppressive policies and regimes (Kauffman, 2017), and that student voices have always led collective struggle (Clay, 2012). We challenge adult readers and adult-led organizations to disrupt the practices we have outlined in our experiences and act courageously alongside us in the collective effort for liberation.

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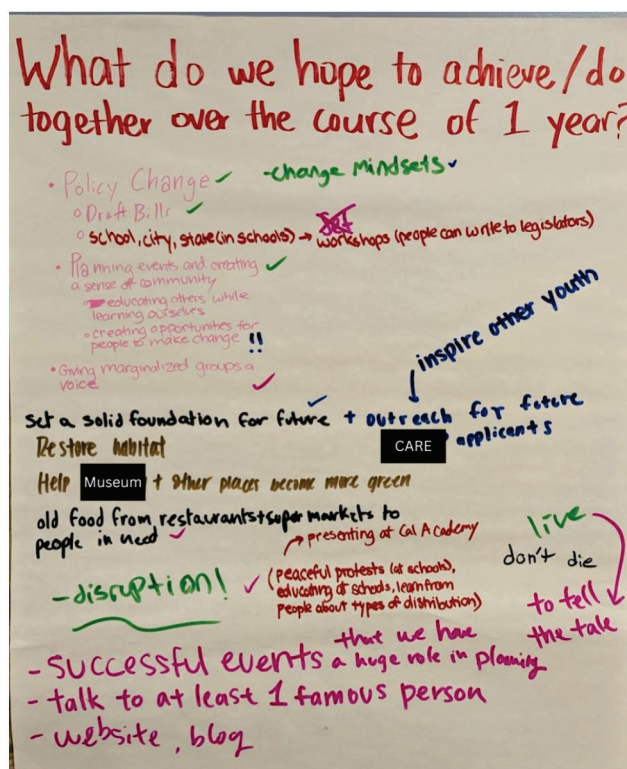
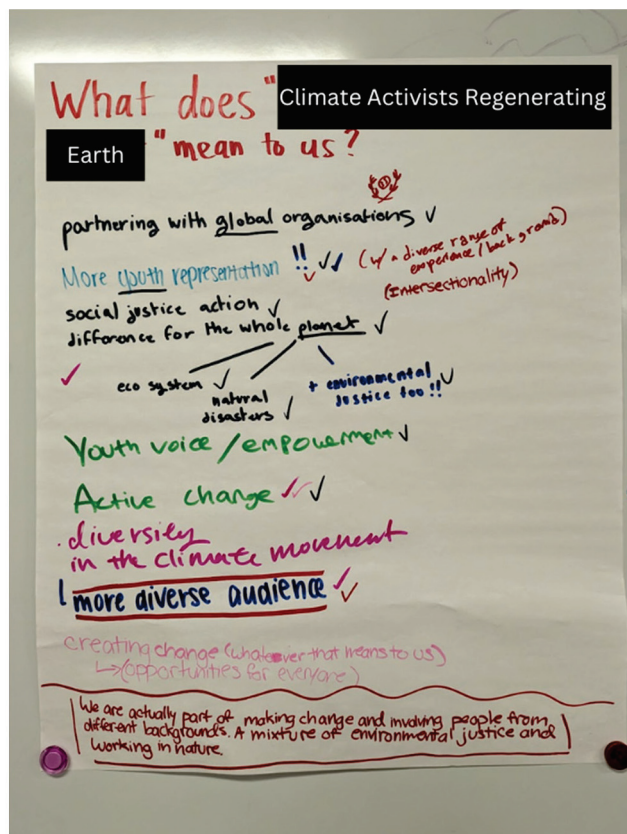
Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Teachers College, Columbia University (protocol code 20-362, no expiration date).

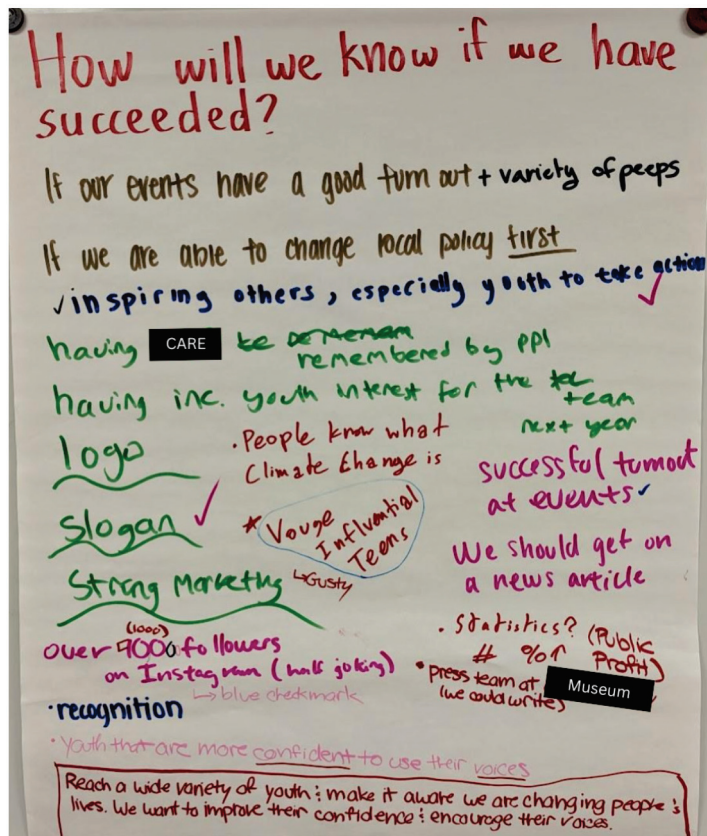
Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. CARE Program Orientation Ideas and Goals





Appendix B. YLC Banner Drop





Notes

- ¹ Drawing from the work of youth activism and social movement scholars, activism here is defined as “efforts to disrupt, impede, or (re)direct the social, political, or economic status quo, with the intention to create institutional change that produces greater equity for all” (see Conner & Rosen, 2016; Kirshner, 2015; Ginwright, 2010; Ginwright et al., 2006; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Lesko & Talburt, 2012). It should be noted that this definition directs the ensuing conversation about activism towards acknowledging and centering counterhegemonic activism only, and not right-wing “activism”, as the latter maintains systems of oppression and hegemonic power.
- ² Institutional affiliation and program name have been replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.
- ³ We wanted to maintain a degree of anonymity and privacy for youth’s developing identities while also providing demographic information pertinent to the study. Therefore, each of the six youth participants is represented with a number instead of their names or a pseudonym. Aleks is the only adult participant, and they have chosen to use their name.

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